


RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Show, Don’t Tell”: Pious Visual Culture in Pakistani Dramas

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Abstract

This article explores how the Pakistan television drama industry mediates collective notions of piety through visual registers. Explicit religious discourse is tightly regulated in the industry, and producers themselves often disavow producing religious content. However, the leakiness of production practices generates religious visual idioms that are transparently circulated and taken up by audiences. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork in Karachi with production teams in this culture industry, I argue that dramas are a central yet overlooked feature of religious publics’ formations in the digitalizing Pakistani mediascape. Focus on religious media in the anthropology of Islam has treated publics as mostly engaged with traditional sources of authority. Attending to scenes from three popular dramas—*Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan* (2009), *Shehr-e-Zaat* (2012), and *Khaani* (2017)—elucidates how visibility is a central facet of how cross-media interactions enregister piety. Observations of cinematographic negotiations and reflections by creators on the ambiguity and efficacy of pious visibility contextualize how religious scenes in these productions come together. While the visibility of prayer scenes across these dramas emphasizes private personal piety, tracing how these images are scripted, depicted, and circulated online offers insights into how religious digital publics are shaped in contemporary Pakistan.

Keywords: Dramas; Piety; Publics; Creators; Visibility

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The room in question is a small office in the back of the house. The walls are painted a pale yellow, and in the center of the room sits a desk with bookshelves lining the walls immediately behind and to the left. There are several family photos on the wall above the bookshelves, and on the desk, there is another framed photo of the homeowner with his arm around his wife, beaming. I am with the crew of a drama produced in-house for the channel Aaj Entertainment. We are set up in a modest middle-class home in Gulistan-e Jauhar, a neighborhood in the eastern part of Karachi. The drama is a comedy, its humorous elements primarily manufactured by the trials of a bigamist man striving to keep the secret of his marriages from his respective wives. Today's shooting location is a home on rent for the show and a recurring site that serves as the second wife's apartment.

After a slow start in the morning, we take a break for lunch. With most of the crew still sitting around the table wrapping up eating, I chat with the Assistant Director (AD) about his past production experience and what he likes about working for Aaj. The cameraman had already gotten up to get equipment prepped for the next round of shots. He came back over, waited for a break in the conversation, and interjected to ask the AD:

C: Where should we set up for the next shot?

AD (*consulting his script*): Let's do it in the study, back there (*points to the pale yellow room*).

C: Isn't this the scene where Sabeena [the female lead] recites *namaz*?

AD: Yep, that's right.

C: We can't do it in that room. There are photos on the wall. There are *hadees* stating that you mustn't pray around images.

AD: Which hadith says that, that's *bakwas* [nonsense]!?

C: *Sahih Muslim*.¹

The AD and cameraman bickered a bit more back and forth (piquing the interest of no one but me), ultimately deciding to film the scene in the adjacent bedroom. That room has only one photo hanging on the wall. They take it down before recommencing filming.

In this article, I examine visual culture norms in the making of Pakistani dramas to consider how making piety *visible*—rather than anchoring pious elements verbally or textually (i.e., discursively)—helps refract and shape collective ideas about Islam and its place in Pakistani society. Through the article, I juxtapose how competing ideas about what constitutes right and wrong in the visual frames of this media world come into being through media practices that span spaces of production and digital reception. Behind-the-scenes engagements with crews' notions of “correctness” (*durustagi*), paired with producers' attention to the receptivity of online audiences, underscores the visually salient aspects of contestation in the continued shaping of an Islamic tradition

¹ One of the six Sunni collections of Prophetic traditions, *ahadith*, authored by Muslim bin al-Hajjaj (Jonathan A. C. Brown, *The Canonization of Al-Bukhārī and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunni Ḥadīth Canon* [Leiden: Brill, 2007]).

for the urban middle-class Pakistani public. I attend to broader socio-religious influences shaping how the drama industry creates its visual medium, how creators reflect on visual practices, and how they view responses from digitally active audiences.

The article details how production practices visually represent religiosity despite repeated claims by industry members that they steer clear of religious themes.² It considers scenes in several dramas, observations on industry sets, and the authorizing discourses that shape these processes in particular contexts.³ Everyday elements of production practice stem from the lived experience of those working in the industry. Workers in the industry, however, hail from vastly different social backgrounds that shape diverging practices in production. Other encounters with boundaries imposed by the state (e.g., regulatory authority) and extra-legal forms of circumscribing authority, including commercial and political assemblages, also influence these productions.⁴

Visual depictions of piety in dramas are attuned to audience engagements on social media and other technologies that gauge audience response. The marketability of specific aesthetics and themes is often at odds with the drama creators' artistic interests. These market-driven standards shape genre conventions around plot, the incorporation of romance and musical elements, a propensity for female leads, and a reliance on relationship tropes between female characters. Moreover, the depiction of religious practice, sacred objects, and ethical norms are also heavily patterned, and creators' desires to deviate from normative depictions meet resistance from fans. Adverse reactions to scenes and narratives sometimes generate controversy, drawing more attention to the production. The disjuncture between producer aims and audience opinions, especially around visual elements, spills into the public sphere and provokes challenges at the intersections of markets, industry players, and regulators.

Shifting across the textures of media practice and the content produced through these practices illuminates how visual markers of religiosity intersect the affects embodied by pious viewers viewing dramas and the markets that shape the industry. I argue that the dominance of visual creative direction is heavily reined in by a myriad of economic and social factors tied up in middle-class ideas about respectability, Sunni norms, and consumption. This visual attention links to the broader discussion about images' permissibility and iconoclasm's place in Pakistani public debate. It also builds on a long-standing articulation about the feminization of correct forms of knowledge, made forcefully in the scholarship on reformist Urdu literature.⁵ Broadly, these

² In other work, I have detailed the focus on "religious-adjacent" themes as one way that the industry achieves this (Elliot Montpellier, "Mirāt Ul-'Urūs on the Small Screen: Family TV Dramas and the Making of Pious Publics in Pakistan," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 10, no. 2 [2019]: 145–63).

³ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 37–39.

⁴ For a detailed examination of regulatory and supraregulatory elements in the television industry more broadly, see Asif Akhtar, "The Regulator Regulated: A Genealogy of the Pakistani Broadcast Media and Its State of 'Double Capture' in the Post-Musharraf Era," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 10, no. 2 (2019): 183–206.

⁵ Though not comprehensive, such arguments can be found in the scholarly literature on figures like Nazir Ahmad (d. 1912), his reformist work, and its legacies (Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia* [University of California Press, 2018]; Ruby Lal, "Gender and Sharafat: Re-Reading Nazir Ahmad," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18, no. 1 [2008]: 15–30; C. M. Naim, "Prize-Winning Adab: A Study of Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification," in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Metcalfe [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 29–314).

discussions support the claim that the industry restricts religious thematic interests while pointing to the leakiness of production practices and how creator practices generate religious visual idioms that are transparently circulated and taken up by audiences in increasingly digital publics.⁶

The opening vignette situates how conversations about filming practices and religious etiquette shape image-making in the industry—the subsequent section places this article in conversation with the literature on the anthropology of Islam. These theoretical engagements also anchor the broader framing of the article as an anthropological investigation that allows exploration of the intersections between practices of media-making and the formations of religious publics through authorizing discourses that surround such practices. My arguments and methods intervene in a broader literature on visual cultures, representations of piety, and audience studies.⁷ However, the central engagement remains one that investigates the importance of how the drama industry mediates collective notions of piety through visual registers that appeal to coherent ideas of Islam that are shared and authorized by audiences.

Potentialities and Pitfalls of Dramas' Visuality

It is essential to situate my understanding of drama producers' negotiations of visual tokens of piety in a capacious understanding of Talal Asad's articulation of Islam as a discursive tradition.⁸ I combine Asad's framework's discursivity with the visual semiotics framework that I highlight in this article. In doing so, I hope to contribute to

⁶ Thank you to the anonymous viewer who used the term “leakiness” to describe how these practices seep beyond regulators' limitations and into the productions. This point is also raised in the context of Iranian cinema, particularly in Laura Mulvey, “Repetition and Return: The Spectator's Memory in Abbas Kiarostami's “Koker Trilogy,” *Third Text* 21, no. 1 (2007): 19–29; also discussed by Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2008). However, in new Iranian cinema, female modesty was to be upheld at the expense of (cinema's) male gaze—that nevertheless suggested its way in, as Mulvey notes— but in Pakistani dramas, notions of modesty are more ambiguously rendered so that religious elements seep out beyond imposed regulatory frameworks.

⁷ The agency of audiences is a pivotal element of industry feedback loops that attune producers to their viewership. Extensive engagement on the “activeness” of audiences is not the focus of this article but an ongoing focus in other work. At the same time, my broader research on the drama industry is also sensitive to critiques of the active audience paradigm, particularly in its applicability to digital media audiences as it experiences widespread digitalization (Grant Bollmer, “Technological Materiality and Assumptions about ‘Active’ Human Agency,” *Digital Culture & Society* 1, no. 1 [2015]: 95–110). For references to the body of literature on active audiences, canonical works include Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (London: Routledge, 1991) and Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973). Though anthropologists—such as Lila Abu-Lughod (*Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005]) and Purnima Mankekar (*Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999])—have relied on similar approaches to understand shared meanings that are co-constructed by viewers, more recent attention to practices, materiality, and mediality in media anthropology shape my wider attention to interactional framework and the authorizing discourses on visual, material, and technological mediations of audience-producer reactions (Brian Larkin, “Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 [2014]: 989–1015).

⁸ Talal Asad. “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” *Occasional Papers from the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies* (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University, 1986).

a literature that continues to take Asad as a departure point to explore various embodied forms of religious practice that, as signifiers, are taken up in subsequent discourse and, over time, produce the social histories of contestations that inhere to the broader tradition.

In his earlier works, Asad makes repeated overtures to embodied, affective dimensions of the Islamic tradition but falls short in pushing past a primarily textual, genealogical, and discursive apparatus for tracing the contestations that constitute a tradition. Where he seeks to take up these questions, both his primary source of discussion and general focus become largely textual, and he adopts a genealogical method that is effective in tracing what he calls an authorizing discourse but does not fully substantiate how anthropologists of Islam might then include this close attention to metadiscourses in examining practices in the present.

David Scott and Charles Hirschkind make this point in their introduction to *Powers of the Secular Modern*. They write, “In his later writings, he increasingly comes to view this [earlier] formulation as failing to adequately appreciate the embodied aspects of traditional action.”⁹ It is only in *Secular Translations*, however, that we see Asad’s work more fully shift toward “the attempt to discover how sentiments/concepts/attitudes” articulate discourses in and about “‘the secular’ and ‘the religious.’”¹⁰ He underscores that “discursive tradition is not merely a verbal process; it is also and primarily an implicit continuity embodied in habit, feeling, and behavior that one acquires as a member of a shared way of life that is translated from one time to another.”¹¹ Dramas and the visual apparatus they provide offer a basis for investigating the kinds of emotions and pious affects that dramas produce across viewing publics.

Several of Asad’s intellectual heirs have taken up sensorial and embodied dimensions of tradition in their work, including Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind.¹² Hirschkind’s work is especially interesting for his thinking through listening processes and the cultural frameworks that govern these practices in connection with the broader Islamic tradition. His investigation of how listening publics get constituted through fostering pious dispositions among cassette sermon listeners is a vital theorization that connects the discursive to the sensorial and affective. Hirschkind’s focus on aural components is deeply attuned to affective registers that assist in making ritual and performative recitations so crucial in considering the making of community and the shaping of collective notions of religious practice. Similarly, Patrick Eisenlohr’s work in Mauritius has pointed to how ritual, sound, and media are interconnected, bringing together communities and shaping tradition.¹³ Eisenlohr, studying both the discursive field and “sonic dynamics” of *na’at* (devotional poems about the Prophet), elucidated how signification

⁹ David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁰ Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹³ Patrick Eisenlohr, *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

across these “different modalities” of affective devotional practices can be analyzed in terms of Perceian semiotics.¹⁴

The remainder of this article analyses three notable dramas that began airing from 2009 to 2017 alongside interviews with these dramas’ creators (from various roles) and production practices in Karachi in 2018. I engage these dramas directly and incorporate creators’ reflections on writing and production practices. Together, these demonstrate how—across nearly a decade of drama-making in the post-liberalization moment of the industry—particular forms of pious visual culture have been sustained and modulated. While much may have changed as the industry migrates to new platforms and takes up new themes, I argue that critical elements in the visual culture fall within largely normativized boundaries.

Biwi Se Biwi Tak: *Hadith*-backed Production in Practice

Biwi Se Biwi Tak ([BSBT] From One Wife to Another One) was a romantic comedy soap that aired on Aaj Entertainment in the summer of 2018 when I first conducted fieldwork in Karachi (Figure 1). The filming of this show offered an entry into the rhythms of production practices. *BSBT* is a smaller production, reflecting Aaj’s market share at the time and the show’s cast and crew’s relative lack of name recognition. Productions like *BSBT*, however, are integral to the industry, as they sustain the constant influx of new content and the 24-hour broadcast of major networks.

The series focuses on the gauche yet humorous travails of a man with two wives who is stuck in the perpetual juggling act of keeping the existence of one wife secret from the other. The show plays on the permissible (but uncommon) practice of marrying multiple women. It can be read as being animated by anxieties around Islamic legal frameworks and the state, class maintenance, and women’s rights discourses in Pakistan.¹⁵ The treatment of the subject in the series is boorish. Still, it should also be read as parodying a broader fascination in the industry with affairs, divorce, and multiple wives producing familial woes and upheaval for the shows’ female protagonists.¹⁶ The humor of the series is decidedly slapstick with cringe-comedic and clowning aspects. I read these as a reflection of a lower-middle-class target audience of the show and the sophomoric tastes of the producers. As with all productions in the industry, *BSBT* is a complex production where comedy, romance, celebrity, commercialism, critique, and everyday religious

¹⁴ Matthew Engelke, “Religion and the Media Turn: A Review Essay,” *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 2 (2010): 371–79.

¹⁵ Legally, multiple marriages are permitted based on 1961 Pakistani law. However, the practice remains isolated regionally and is often used to signify elite position and religiosity. Recent legal rulings have firmly sided with women, stipulating that the wife’s approval is necessary for a second marriage to proceed. A 2017 case resulted in significant fines and imprisonment for a man brought to trial by his first wife, who had not been consulted.

¹⁶ For example, *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012) or *Hum and Numm* (2013) on Geo are two earlier serials on the theme. Also see *Muqaddar*, *Muhabbat Tujhe Alvida*, *Qurbatain*, *Jalan*, *Zara Yad Kar*, *Sanam*, *Munafiq*, *Mohabbatein Chahatein*, and many others. There are many others where love triangles, divorce, and forced marriage play key dramatic roles. These serials emerge from all the leading production houses and networks and the second-tier Aaj network. Media posts have regularly taken dramas to task for these depictions of polygamy and other improper dimensions to depict marriage and love (Uzair Anwer, “Pakistani Dramas and Their Problematic Obsession with Divorce,” September 22, 2020 [<https://galaxyhollywood.com/2020/09/22/pakistani-drama-obsession-divorce>] (accessed September 30, 2023))).



Figure 1. On the set of *Biwi Se Biwi Tak* (2018).

practice come together. Amidst these elements, what interests me are the negotiations in the filming of pious shots.

On the particular day when the debate over *hadith*, photographs, and *namaz* (prayer) occurred, the crew was filming shots for a handful of episodes to take advantage of being on that set for the day. This scene, in particular, led to a vigorous debate involving the cameraman and AD about the permissibility of filming a prayer scene in a room with photographs on the wall. The harsh back-and-forth of this exchange wasn't particularly noteworthy—in fact, the general tenor on set is pretty high stress with a great deal of yelling to get people into place and doing things in synch—but for the fact that this heated conversation arose over the visual representation of proper pious etiquette piqued my interest.

In the context of this crew, I understood the relative distinction in class positions between the men to animate some of the diverging perspectives on religion.¹⁷

¹⁷ While the female writers' works that I describe below—and the many more female writers across the industry—have been an integral part of the industry and its success, production professions remain male-dominated; while female actors are on set during filming, they would often relocate to a room with an air conditioner and away from male banter.



Figure 2. Reading *namaz* on set (lower right of image).

The more comfortably class-positioned cast members spoke openly and often of their socializing habits (e.g., sports, going out, parties, and video games), rarely including religious activities. By contrast, one of the spot boys (the terming itself points to the relative position of this crew member to others) approached me to ask a question about my religious practices. Moin hesitatingly asked, pointing to my *aqeeq*, the silver ring with an agate stone on my right hand, “Do you remove it in the washroom?” At first, I was taken aback by the personal nature of the question. I quickly contextualized it as following my steering of that day’s lunch conversation to the subject of religion in dramas. The question also spoke to the crew’s interest in my religious practice as a convert from North America and that I situated a study of Islam in Pakistan within the framework of dramas (of all things!).

As it is traditionally recounted that the Prophet wore this kind of agate ring, there is a practice of revering the ring and keeping it from polluting spaces. Moin’s careful attention to my aesthetics and comportment shows how such visual markers jumped out to him. As this example illustrates, crew members were attentive (sometimes in unexpected ways) to my perceived role as a spiritual novice who had oddly approached them as entertainment television producers to discuss religion. Yet, on *BSBT*, no one took time out of the filming schedule to pray. On other sets, I observed prayers being recited, again by crew members from lower-class positions, within the rhythms of the production day (Figure 2). It is worth comparing these spaces, where overt religious practices are marginal, to other elements of public life in Pakistan. Working in production spaces fits unevenly into expectations about everyday religious practices, pious visual culture, labor, and class in this Pakistani culture industry.

While my questions about Islam in dramas may have set the tone for this interaction with the spot boy and our conversations about religion over lunch, the considerable disagreement about the visual representation of prayer scenes where personal piety is foregrounded points to perceived anxieties around how such depictions would be

received. It inverts the norms that govern the internal male-dominated space of the set and favors the more religious position of the cameraman—who generally possesses less authority vis-à-vis his work on location.¹⁸ We must understand the careful negotiations between those on set (primarily male) and perceptions about the audience as overwhelmingly female to read the serials emerging from the industry. While audiences are more diverse than the industry conceives, gendered perceptions about the audience dominate. Therefore, aspirational middle-class forms of knowledge about what is considered Islamically correct are feminized in the industry.

Examining the rhythms of production practices for *BSBT* shed light on the ambiguities that permeate the drama world concerning respectability, social values, and piety. The negotiation of humor, *masala* (mix of genre conventions), and the depiction of pious themes alongside one another in a visual medium is a vital aspect to consider in the industry and how media creators within this space contend with their complex social positions, precarious labor, and the public understanding of the industry.

Setting Prayer Scenes: Contestations around *Namaz* and Pious Visuality

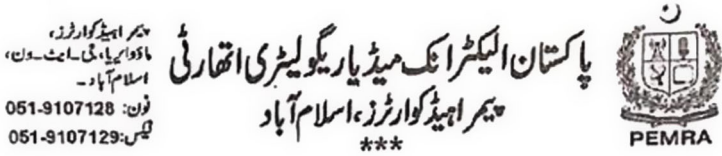
Above, I described an AD and cameraman's conversation about prayer scenes and *hadith*-sanctioned cinematography to sketch day-to-day production norms for depicting piety on television. Their disagreement highlights the tension in considering entertainment television in the Pakistani mediascape: dramatized depictions of household and social life in Pakistani dramas bear little evident resemblance to explicitly religious TV programs also airing on screens at home. In discussing dramas with production staff especially, there is significant hesitancy in framing dramas as taking up questions around religious practice and religious life discussed alongside social issues, which *have* emerged as recognized and important animating themes for dramas. Yet, across this demographic of creators, there is a noticeable sense of the importance of relatable and aspirational depictions of piety for audiences. Namely, how can being “good”—as we will see in each of the following examples—help overcome social and individual challenges that viewers supposedly face themselves? This vision is articulated by many of the industry's network leaders and creators. The importance of these depictions is manifest in the shifting focus to social issues, new modes of apprehending dramas' audience, and a shared commitment to working within the state's regulatory parameters to uphold “standards of decency.”¹⁹ Since media liberalization in 2002, this has resulted in catering to normative audience tastes that conform to these statutory parameters.

These practices remain driven, at least in part, by revenue-seeking behavior. Revenue generation is strongly linked to the target point rating. For these reasons, many popular shows have been largely uncontroversial and self-censoring.²⁰ Several exceptions (e.g., *Meray Pass Tum Ho*, which aired on ARY in 2019) have garnered high ratings (and thus revenues) despite facing bans, court cases, and outrage on social

¹⁸ While not the case on the set of *BSBT*, behavior on several others was, at times, overtly lewd.

¹⁹ PEMRA stipulates this parameter in its founding statute (2002) and subsequent amendments (2007) in Sections 20 and 27.

²⁰ Arvind Rajagopal makes a similar point in the Indian context (Arvind Rajagopal, ed., *The Indian Public Sphere: Readings in Media History* [New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009]).



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پاکستان الیکٹرانک میڈیا ریگولیٹری اتھارٹی
ہیمر ایڈیٹورز، اسلام آباد

﴿پریس ریلیز﴾

ہیمر کی اسے آروائی ڈیجیٹل کے ڈرامہ سیریل "جلن" پر پابندی عائد

اسلام آباد: 10 ستمبر 2020ء

ہیمر نے اسے آروائی ڈیجیٹل کے ڈرامہ سیریل جلن کی نشریات پر فوری طور پر مکمل پابندی عائد کر دی ہے۔ مذکورہ ڈرامہ سیریل میں سماجی اور مذہبی اقدار کے منافی مواد نشر کرنے پر شدید عوامی رد عمل اور شکایات موصول ہو رہی تھیں۔ چینل کی جانب سے ڈرامہ کے سکرپٹ میں خاطر خواہ تبدیلی نہ ہونے پر کارروائی کرتے ہوئے ہیمر آرڈیننس کے سیکشن 27 کے تحت مذکورہ ڈرامہ نشر کرنے پر پابندی عائد کر دی ہے۔ چینل انتظامیہ کو بار بار استنبہ کیا گیا تھا کہ ڈرامہ کے مواد کا جائزہ لیں اور سکرپٹ کو پاکستانی اقدار کے مطابق بنائیں بصورت دیگر ہیمر آرڈیننس کے تحت کارروائی کی جائے گی۔

یہاں یہ امر قابل ذکر ہے کہ ہیمر نے مورخہ 18 اگست کو تمام چینلوں کو مفصل مراسلہ / ہدایت نامہ جاری کیا تھا اور ڈراموں کے مواد کو پاکستانی اقدار کے مطابق بنائے جانے سے متعلق حتمی ہدایت نامہ جاری کیا تھا۔ تاہم چینل انتظامیہ کی جانب سے کوئی خاطر خواہ کارروائی نہ ہونے کی صورت میں اتھارٹی کو حتمی قدم اٹھاتے ہوئے ڈرامہ سیریل "جلن" کی نشریات پر پابندی عائد کرنا پڑی جس پر اسے آروائی ڈیجیٹل کو فوری عمل درآمد کی ہدایت دی گئی ہے۔


جنرل منیجر (میڈیا و تعلقات عامہ)

Figure 3. Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) press release on *Pyar Ke Sadqay* and *Ishqiya*, September 10, 2020.

media. Since the success of *Meray Pass Tum Ho*, ARY, in particular, has courted more significant controversy, including with *Jalan* in 2020 (Figure 3) and *Ishqiya* in 2020.²¹ These were criticized under Section 27 of the 2002 Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) ordinance “for broadcasting content that goes against social and religious values.”²²

In the next section, I analyze several drama productions’ visual elements across a nearly 10-year period to better understand the treatment of piety across their narratives. Alongside the social realities of media-makers that percolate into the

²¹ Hum’s *Pyar Ke Sadqay* (2020) was banned from rebroadcast in the same announcement as *Ishqiya*.
²² A September 10, 2020, press release banning *Ishqiya* and *Pyar Ke Sadqay* states, “samaji aur mazhabi iqdar ke munafi mawad nashar karne par.”

making of these dramas and broader political-economic observations, this visual analysis helps situate the industry's approach to, as PEMRA statements outline, "[have] regard for Islamic teachings," not distort "established religious beliefs," and "depicting true [sic] picture of Pakistani society."²³ I turn to three drama serials: *Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan* (2009) and *Khaani* (2017), both aired by Geo, and *Shehr-e-Zaat* (2012) by Hum.²⁴ I explore these three dramas to consider how prayer scenes and visual pious adornments are employed in industry narratives. I situate this televisual analysis alongside ethnographic interviews with writers, directors, actors, and creators behind these same dramas. *Meri Zaat* and *Shehr-e-Zat* were written by Umera Ahmed, an influential writer who has moved from writing pulp digests to mass-market novels and now, since the late 2000s, is one of the most dominant screenwriters in the industry. While *Khaani*, written by Asma Nabeel, stands apart in many ways from Ahmed's oeuvre, I highlight how the approach to prayer adopts representations of male piety that depart from the more common female-centric gaze. Yet, overall, it relies on similarly tropic visual elements as other productions.

Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan

Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan (MZZM) is an early production by Geo, airing in 2009 and one of the network's first well-known serials.²⁵ It remains a benchmark among early dramas for its commercial success and for setting an aesthetic tone for the spiritual romance genre on Pakistani television for more than a decade to come. I turn to MZZM to address various ways that the serial crafts *namaz* scenes to drive plot development and produce effective responses for viewers through emotional scenes. I closely examine the visual deployment of the *tasbeeh*, or prayer beads, to index the mother's piety and the broader tokenization of pious material objects in shaping normative forms of characters' religiosity.

Much of the MZZM narrative takes place as flashbacks of Arfeen, whose *nikah* (marriage) with Saba is dissolved when she refuses to swear on the *Qur'an* that she did not have an affair with his cousin. Saba is depicted as possessing upper-class and liberal attitudes shaped by her time abroad. These include her interest in continuing to study at university and her passion for painting. In contrast, the conservativeness of Arfeen's mother, Shakila, is tied to her opposition to Saba as her son's partner. Shakila is portrayed as deeply pious, and we find her in scenes with a *tasbeeh* in hand. There are also repeated scenes of her reciting *dua* (supplication) after her *namaz*, praying to end Arfeen's love for Saba.

²³ Published advice and accompanying press release from PEMRA dated January 8, 2019.

²⁴ These titles, since I discuss them at length, are worth translating. The first slightly longer title, *Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan*, plays somewhat with Urdu poetics of *be nishan*, both "trace" and "stain" to signify both "my being is an unstained thing" or "I am a thing without a trace." *Khaani* draws on the image of strength and nobleness of "Khan," a common surname and formal rank in some South Asian courts, to ascribe these qualities to the show's female protagonist. *Shehr-e Zaat* translates to the City of Being (but *zaat* can also signify ideas of ethnic group/caste membership and indexes aspects of class anxieties and issues at the heart of drama narratives).

²⁵ The show starred Samiya Mumtaz, Faysal Qureshi, Adnan Siddiqui, and Samina Peerzada, among several other notables, and was directed by Babar Javed.



Figure 4. Arfeen holds the Qur'an in his hands as his mother (with a serious look on her face) prepares to attest that she witnessed Saba (in yellow in the back of the frame) behaving inappropriately with one of Arfeen's male relations.

The good and bad binary set up intergenerationally between Saba and Shakila are variations on the stock characters of Akbari and Asghari, drawn from literary contexts and adapted in other dramas.²⁶ Given the groundbreaking success of *MZZM* in the post-liberalization period, I understand the crafting of the narrative in this manner as laying the foundation for the industry's play on this trope moving forward. Umera Ahmed, the writer of the teleplay, based on her novella of the same name, interrogates the normative assumptions about Saba and Shakila's inner pious qualities (*zaat*)—hence the title of the serial—through a singular scene (Episode 10) that inverts the viewers understanding of the characters' outer tokens of piety (or lack thereof).

Shakila manufactures a scandal to undo the *rishtah* (engagement) by locking Saba and Arfeen's cousin in a room and having other family members find them in this compromising position. Shakila falsely swears on the *Qur'an* (Figure 4) that she witnessed an impropriety between them and invites Saba to deny the accusations by similarly swearing on the *Qur'an*. Saba, having been beaten by members of the family, refuses to do so and escapes. Shakila's *tasbih* poignantly drops from her hand in the scene, visually articulating her "fall" from pious heights. Subsequently, having successfully (through false witness) thwarted the marriage, she experiences the immense dejection of her son, and for the remainder of the serial, she is filmed praying for forgiveness. Several later episodes open with her reciting *namaz* or *zikh*

²⁶ These characters are from Nazir Ahmad's *Mirat ul-Uroos* (1869), widely considered Urdu's first novel. The good daughter, Asghari, runs in circles around the wayward daughter, Akbari. She excels in managing the home, navigating changing cultural norms, in her piety, and intellectually becoming a teacher of other young women in the *mohalla* or neighborhood. For a lengthier discussion, see Montpellier, "Mirāt Ul-Urūs on the Small Screen," 145–63.



Figure 5. Shakila sits on her *jahnamaz* (prayer rug), *tasbeeh* in hand, lamenting with Arfeen's sisters at what she has done, one of many examples of *tauba* (repentance) and *istighfar* (seeking forgiveness from God) in the dramas.

(meditative recitation) with *tasbeeh* in hand (Figure 5), seeking forgiveness from God (*istighfar*), and repentance (*tauba*).²⁷

I had the opportunity to speak with one of the female leads in *MZZM* to discuss her experience producing the drama. She recounted that her rule of thumb for working on a project is “How are they showing women?” especially in terms of treatment by men and the visual depiction of women’s piety (e.g., through veiling). Echoing Ammara Maqsood’s ethnographic work on the Lahori middle class, the actor notes that urban women have morality placed on them; with all the accoutrements of moving up, they need to keep their values.²⁸ The actor notes the following:

[The writer of *MZZM*] Umera is compelling as an author, and you start empathizing with the characters because she writes well. But what she is saying at the end of the day is very damaging to the role of women in society. She says, “Don’t you know that women are the ones that have to compromise? This is what we have to teach our daughters. They must learn to be above it all and swallow the bitter pill.” This is what she believes in. For women to be empowered, they must bear all the atrocities that come their way. We can’t let the social fabric crumble.

²⁷ For a description of *hadith* literature that considers these two terms, see Frederick Mathewson, “Tauba” (Leiden: Brill, 2012) and “Tawba” in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd Edition*, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs.

²⁸ Ammara Maqsood, *The Pakistani Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

This female lead drew specific attention to flashback scenes where one of the characters is working in the factory of Arfeen's family (unbeknownst to him) and is wearing a *chadar* around her face. Narratologically, this veiling practice signaled the character's attempt to fit into the conservative dress conventions of the working women around her in the factory and evade chance discovery by the family. Yet, for the actor, this visual motif "normalize[d] that working women should be covering their face when they step out," enacting piety to cope with the injustices wrought upon her by her extended family. In effect, argues this actor, the use of *niqab* or *chador* (draped veil) as a narrative motif also serves as a material index of piety and the ways that the practical and the spiritual function in tandem for characters and, by extension, their audiences. While voicing frustration at this element of the work, she highlights how dramas' visual representations of piety normalize specific behaviors, sometimes regardless of the intent behind these representations. Throughout *MZZM*, the humility of Saba and the shift from venality to contrition by Arfeen's mother are evoked metonymically through dress and religious objects. The role of religious outlooks is never mentioned directly but instead is made apparent through the emotional registers of the characters in relation to behaviors and visual tropes.

Shehr-e-Zaat

As the actor's account of *MZZM* suggests, writer Umera Ahmed falls back on didactic techniques to motivate the plot of her stories. HumTV aired *Shehr-e Zaat* (SZ), also written by Ahmed and coming on the heels of *Humsafar* (written by another notable author, Farhat Ishtiaq), which has widely been billed as the big breakout series for the industry.²⁹ *Shehr-e-Zat* was produced with many of the same key players as *Humsafar*.³⁰ Viewing *Shehr-e-Zat* alongside interviews with its creators reveals challenges and contestations over its representation of spirituality and piety that audience reactions spurred and the implications for producers.

Shehr-e-Zat recounts the story of an upper-class art student, Falak, who one day sculpts the likeness of a man whose image she falls in love with, only to encounter him in real life. Romance ensues, and they marry, yet the relationship falls apart when the central character learns of her husband's infidelity. Through the ensuing struggle, she turns to her pious *nani* (maternal grandmother), who guides her toward prayer and reciting the Qur'an, practices that help recenter her outlook on life, contends with her guilt over being impious, and seeks redemption in God. Two notable denouements take shape: first, Falak angrily (and iconoclastically) destroys the sculpture in her husband's image. Second, after returning to him, the story concludes with a piously inflected "happily ever after" where she asks her daughter if she woke up to pray that morning. Across the narrative, the importance of *fajr namaz* (dawn prayer) is highlighted. Earlier, the main character's *nani* emphasizes its benefits. Through the dedicated relearning and practice of *panch-waqt-ki-namaz* (five-times-a-day prayer), Falak finds comfort and peacefulness in her situation.

²⁹ Ahmed did not respond to several direct and brokered attempts to be interviewed in 2018 and 2021. She has similarly offered very few interviews to journalists.

³⁰ Directed by Sarmad Khoosat, produced by Momina Duraid, and starring Mahira Khan, in this case alongside Mekaal Zulfiqar, Mohib Mirza, Samina Peerzada, and several others in minor roles.



Figure 6. Falak seeks guidance on how to perform *wuzu*, reupload to Hum's YouTube Page.

Episode 16 of *SZ* is notable for the visually prominent episode of *namaz*. It is the apex of Falak's redemption, with scenes of her (re)learning to do *wuzu* (ritual ablutions), struggling to read the *Qur'an*, and remembering the proper way to say *namaz*. One creator I spoke with discussed difficulties in shooting *wuzu* and *namaz* scenes in *SZ*, given the actual time these take relative to the time for shots. Noor referenced their sisters as inspiring the visual approach, "they work and say *namaz* regularly, so they'll take a *chadar* out of a purse and pray in jeans." Noor envisioned Falak doing this, especially as she transitioned to a more pious life, thinking it would make sense to depict this transition sartorially. They related to me the responses to these scenes that they read online, things like, "You showed the *wuzu ka tariqa* (method for ablutions) wrong," and "When a woman is supposed to do *wuzu* [ablutions], she isn't supposed to take her *dupatta* off" (Figure 6). These decisions (particularly in staging a transition into an increasingly pious habitus) made sense for the creative team, even if these might contravene some literalist interpretations of practice.

In an effusive post on Umera Ahmed's Official Facebook Page after airing the final episode, Mahira Khan highlights the place of debate over religious elements throughout the filming process.

Discussions on set about every scene became the norm. Be it Hina, Samina Peerzada, or Sarmad, we were constantly debating scenes. Everyone had their take on religion, spirituality . . . on *zaat*.³¹

³¹ Quoted from a post by Mahira Khan, who played Falak, on "Umera Ahmed Official Facebook Page," November 5, 2012 (<https://www.facebook.com/umeraahmedofficial/posts/mahira-khan-about-shehr-e-zaat-my-fellow-soul-searchers-it-has-ended-finally-it-/434663466594308> [accessed September 30, 2023]).

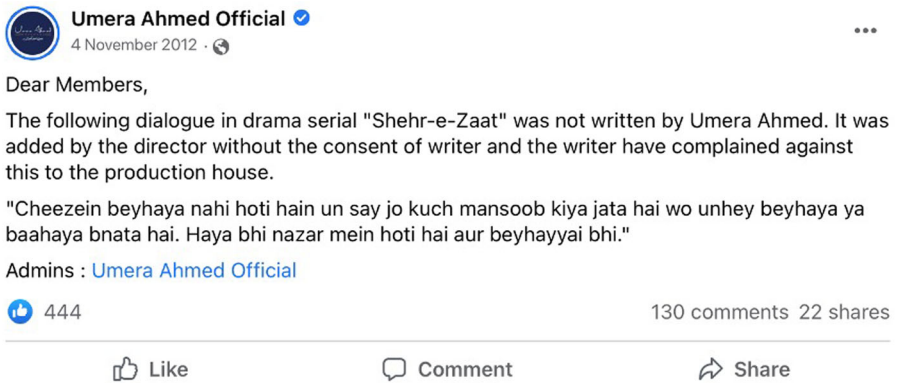


Figure 7. Umera Ahmed Facebook response to dialogues rewritten by the director.

In response to this episode, online comments referenced religious authority to further debate the broadcasted *wuzu* scene. Some highlighted that the scene differed from what the author, Umera Ahmed, had written in the published print version of the play. Noor articulated how quickly audiences can turn on those who bring visual effects to her stories. They admitted that it became,

Scary because people were like, “*Yeh hadees ke mutabiq ghalat hai*” [according to the *hadith*, or traditions of the Prophet, this is incorrect]. We are talking about a play. Where are *hadees* (*hadith*) coming in? But for the audience, Umera is all *hadees* and authentic. She wouldn’t say anything like this.

The *wuzu* scene includes several close-up shots cut together to indicate the steps of ablutions instead of lingering on the entire process in a single shot. It garnered pushback from viewers. As evidenced by the social media responses to this *namaz* scene, the visuality of piety in dramas produced by drama creators generates a social life once these images are broadcast.

Ahmed’s social media team for her official Facebook account issued statements (Figure 7) articulating that she had not written the prayer scenes broadcast, distancing herself from what had been viewed as incorrect and stirring controversy. Her perspective garners much support in the comments as her fans consider her deeply pious. The page I mention here references *hadith* and *ayat* (verses of the Qur’an), and she has been adamant about extreme privacy, including not having pictures of her in public nor interviews given.

The evidence on social media and other online textual archives points to rich discursive practices around visual elements of dramas. Examples from *BSBT* and the reflections of Mahira Khan about on-set practices for *SZ* point to the debate over embodied piety as it is being enacted for the small screen. Digital circulations highlight the broader contestations taking place. Specifically, visual indexes of stereotypic behaviors—prayer, seeking forgiveness, veiling, confiding in God, accepting one’s fate—are enregistered in semiotic processes that transcend the

diegetic space.³² From set to the small screen (and even smaller phone screen), these movements provide new spaces for performances of audiences' pious performances and the resemiotization of visual communication to digitally mediated discursive interactions.³³ These digital worlds are rich spaces for audience engagement, the emergence of global communities of viewers, and the forging of identities that traverse the virtual sphere into everyday life.

David Morgan makes this point with regard to visual culture in his work on "the sacred gaze," writing that "images tend to operate in a system of signification within a given community of image-users."³⁴ Visual culture and visual practices are more than just about the images. These practices and their significance for viewers are shaped by the interplay between the image and the act of seeing conditioned by cultural practices, history, and habits. Morgan outlines a methodological framework for understanding image-making across the industry, stating, "Comparing images with one another allows the analyst to establish a sense of visual context that serves as a norm for interpreting imagery."³⁵ The extensive distribution of such images by the industry provides clues about the interrelation between a commercial industry, normative Sunni codes of piety, and its receptive audience.

Noor expressed concern that, as with much of mainstream Pakistani dramas, with *SZ*, they knew they would reinforce stereotypic representations of religion. They pinpoint a distinction often made between depicting religion and addressing it discursively or narratologically. They said, "When anyone says they talk about religion, they're not talking about religion. They are just showing, depicting, the conformist set of things people do." Describing religion as simultaneously a "no-go zone" and omnipresent, this echoes a discordant relationship in drama worlds between a purported unwillingness to present dramas addressing contentious religio-cultural traditions while maintaining a commitment to realism and piety in plot and character development.

Noor pointed to ways that religion is not *discussed* but *shown*. For example, they are *shown* reciting *namaz* to demonstrate that someone is religious. In other interviews, I heard responses to my questions about addressing religion: "It's not our place to be the one interpreting things." By contrast, this creator pointed out, "By not interpreting it on a personal level as an interpretation, you're sticking to some stance in any case." To avoid controversy, drama makers rely on conventional visual tokens of piety rather than bringing up religious subjects through reflexive discursivity. While it is a fairly common criticism of Pakistani televisual culture that the industry is still making radio plays for TV (i.e., there is an unnecessary dialogue that would be better "shown" than "told"), religion falls into the opposite trap.

The second central denouement in *SZ* brings another element to this analysis of visual representation and piety in relation to production practices. Falak's interest in making art is called out by her pious *nani*, who says at one point, "*But kyun banati ho?*" (why do you make idols?). Image-making becomes a focal point for Falak's turn to God

³² Asif Agha, *Language and Social Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³³ Sirpa Leppänen, Samu Kytölä, Henna Jousmäki, and Saija Peuronen, "Entextualization and Resemiotization as Resources for Identification in Social Media," in *The Language of Social Media*, eds. Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014), 112–36.

³⁴ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 45.

³⁵ *Ibid.*



Umera Ahmed Official ✓

2 December 2021 · 🌐



Some social media pages, bloggers and websites are sharing this lady's pics as Umera Ahmed's pics. These are not Umera Ahmed's pics. As Umera Ahmed doesn't appear in public we therefore would request everyone to respect her privacy and not use random women's pics from web under her name as it's a misuse of these women's pics too.

Figure 8. Umera Ahmed social media page on images in her likeness.

when she smashes the sculpture that she had initially made that resembled the man she would later marry.³⁶ The main character's redemption is visually rendered with attention to her slowly changing dress style, donning *hijab*, and changes in speech toward an increasingly God-conscious register. Falak's "break" with her art and the "idol" function indexically, signifying the ruptures she experiences with both her romance/relationship with her unfaithful husband as well as her personal/essential (*zaati*) development in terms of virtues and ethics.

One interlocutor pointed out the inherent contradictions of needing a dramatic visual medium to advocate for a visually modest appearance and produce these dramas with an anti-art message. He asked, "If this is *haram*, to begin with, the whole industry, why are we a part of it? In order to say that someone is immoral because of what they wear, you are making an actor actually wear that. How about that actor? I'm exploiting that person with makeup, visuals, music." This quote carries additional weight with respect to how the writer herself "doesn't appear in public" (Figure 8). This exasperation on the part of this drama maker speaks to the intense challenges for creation in this environment: one must simultaneously create commercially viable content while also adhering to, even advancing rationales that contradict or cast ethical doubts on this creative work (and worker) it/themself.³⁷

These elements of conversation around the making of SZ highlight converging challenges for those creating dramas. On the one hand, there is a need to appeal to conventional notions of piety through visibility and aesthetics, yet not overly engage, especially discursively, with potentially contentious issues around religious practice. On the other hand, some of these articulations, which resonate with audiences, contravene artistic aims. Rather than frame these challenges as paradoxical, I argue that these competing notions for drama makers point to how close attention to audience feedback drives the industry. By 2012, social media had begun to reorient how the creative process could be attentive to audience reception and what that might entail for production—whether "in-run" or thinking toward future runs (Figure 9). Focusing on *Khaani*, aired five years later, articulates changing elements within the industry and how a globalizing audience and increasingly digital ecology impacted pious visibility.

³⁶ It is worth contextualizing this issue in dramas with two critical articulations of the place of image-making, idolatry, and iconoclasm in Muslim South Asia (Jamal J. Elias, "[Un] Making Idolatry: From Mecca to Bamiyan," *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 4, no. 2 (2007): 12–29; Naveeda Khan, "The Martyrdom of Mosques: Imagery and Iconoclasm in Modern Pakistan," in *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization*, ed. Saurabh Dube (London: Routledge, 2010).

³⁷ Sarmad Khoosat, perhaps the most prominent member of the SZ production staff, has repeatedly witnessed the extent of potential risks associated with work in the industry. His films *Zindagi Tamasha* (2019) and *Joyland* (2022) faced intense scrutiny and backlash.



Figure 9. Umera Ahmed Official Facebook Page manager calls for audience members to share their thoughts on that night's episode.

Khaani

This 2017 drama ostensibly sought to set a new course in the drama world.³⁸ A Geo production, it was the vanguard for addressing social issues through the popular televisual medium. Its commercial success, reception, and role within an emerging trend in “tackling social issues” is notable.³⁹ Mir Hadi, the son of a prominent feudal politician, mercilessly kills a fellow student over a trivial parking issue. The drama addresses the coercive power of elite feudal families and the justice system's failure to hold offenders to account. *Khaani* charted a new path for commercial success by taking on social issues, developing a strong male lead, and retaining popular romantic motifs.⁴⁰

The young female protagonist, Khaani, sister of the deceased, stands up to him and his family, unwilling to be cowed by the political pressure, coercion, and even physical violence they exert. This brazen defense by Khaani quixotically endears her to Mir Hadi, and he zealously seeks her affection. The initial brash chauvinism of his obsession forces Khaani's family into hiding. This obsessiveness gives way to devotion of a higher order as he realizes the only way to win her over is to repent and seek forgiveness from God. Though even his earnest “conversion” never amounts to bringing Khaani and him together, his newfound piety drives him to accept his fate, surrender to authorities (against his parents' wishes), and await a death sentence.

Like Falak from *SZ*, at the outset of *Khaani*, Mir Hadi is depicted as self-centered, Westernized, impious, and irreverent. Across the industry, these traits have been used effectively as “stereotypic characteristics of incumbents of particular interactional roles.”⁴¹ As such, they index a corrupted moral outlook in these characters.⁴² In a scene in the second half of the series, Hadi is at the shrine of Hazrat Ghazi Ali Shah Bukhari just before he embarks on his transformation. In the establishing shot, he

³⁸ Starring Feroze Khan and Sana Javed, written by Asma Nabeel and directed by Anjum Shahzad under 7th Sky Productions.

³⁹ The story is loosely based on the story of the murder of Shahzeb Khan in 2012.

⁴⁰ It also quickly made the jump to Netflix and was the only current production during that period to do so, joining older dramas *Humsafar* (2011), *Sadqay Tumhare* (2014), and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012).

⁴¹ Asif Agha, *Language and Social Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 55.

⁴² Many other dramas have used this framing to motivate plot/romantic tension, especially related to class, occupation, and indexes of respectability. A noteworthy and complex example is *Raqs-e-Bismil*, a drama that juxtaposes two families of more “traditional” backgrounds: the young man is from the family of a hereditary lineage of *pir*, and the young woman is from a dance *gharana*/non-sanguine family of *tawa'if* (performer, historically a courtesan), to discuss matters of respectability, piety, and tradition. However, despite having a customary occupation, the woman is also marked as disreputable for participating in high-class and Westernized parties.



Figure 10. A very cool Mir Hadi stands off to the side in the establishing shot.

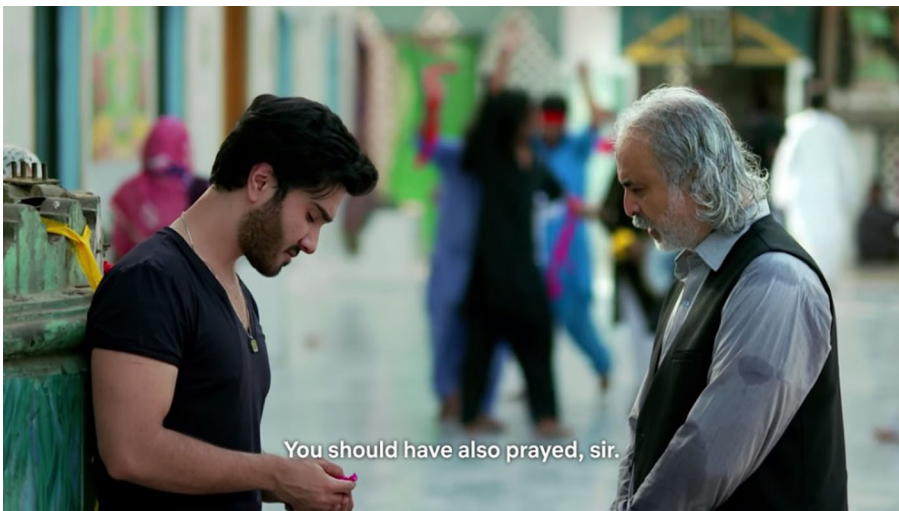


Figure 11. Mir Hadi's bodyguard chastises him for not going to the *dargah* to pray.

stands off to the side dressed in a tight-fitting black T-shirt and jeans, looking indifferent to being in the sacred space and despondent about the rebuffs from Khaani (Figure 10).

Hadi moves his head around, taking the scene in, anticipating his forthcoming deep connection with the *dargah* later in the series. But, at this juncture in the serial, he brushes off the suggestion when his driver and bodyguard suggest that he recite a *dua* (Figure 11). He says he doesn't need to beg and can get what he wants without



Figure 12. Mystery *niqabi* comes to drive home the point.

God. In the following scene, a woman in a white *niqab* comes into the scene, comes up to him, and says, “*Joh murte nahin hain, woh tut jate hain*” (Figure 12), an exchange with multiple valences implying both the character’s stubbornness and the act of prostrating before God.⁴³

By contrast, Khaani’s confidence is routinely framed through her faith. For example, she fights Mir Hadi in a subsequent episode, saying she isn’t afraid of him because he is at God’s mercy. As is often achieved in drama serials, she displaces Mir Hadi’s accountability for his transgressions from the material world into the cosmic realm of the divine. This acceptance that justice may not happen through the courts and her faith that he will be punished in the afterlife anchors her resilience in the face of the coercion, threats, and violence enacted by Mir Hadi and his family. The balance between diverging ways of apprehending justice—how right and wrong are adjudicated—is anchored to *dunya* (worldly or materially driven) on the one hand and, on the other, in *deen* (religious or God-conscious).

The narrative seeks to resolve this incongruity in the forms of knowledge between the two main characters—and by extension in the social—by bringing Mir Hadi toward Khaani’s reverence and trust in God. During a later scene at the *dargah*, the same woman in *niqab*—who turns out to be a kind of apparition or *jinn*—tells Hadi to “only worry about if He is pleased with you,” as he falters when Khaani does not immediately take to his initial, shallow performance of piety. The resolution is unambiguous in favor of *deen* triumphing over *dunya*. In a significant twist, Mir Hadi then submits to the justice of the state, which, up until this point, his family had successfully stymied. Again, this serves to metonymically tie the triumph of his repentance (*tauba*) and seeking forgiveness from God (*istighfar*) to the state’s capacity to deal with his crime; state apparatus (*dunya*) must be similarly beholden to *deen*.

⁴³ The translation is taken from the Netflix subtitling, though a more literal translation would be “turn” for *murna*.



Figure 13. Mir Hadi's mother laments her poor mothering while supplicating.

The narrative employs Mir Hadi's and Khaani's mothers to further visualize distinctions around pious and worldly preoccupations by placing the two characters in contrasting prayer scenes. These visual strategies make the drama genre firmly anchored to the family by stressing the centrality of the family unit as the site for producing and preserving pious habitus. These televisual images also contribute to the metapragmatics of visualizing correct forms of prayer and piety and locating the religious self in the world.

Later, Hadi's mother is filmed clumsily attempting to pray, vocalizing that she does not know how to and pleading with God to forgive her son. As he faces the death penalty, she tries to take responsibility for not teaching him right from wrong (Figure 13). By contrast, in the next episode, upon learning that the sentencing will go ahead despite Hadi's family's appeals (and prayers), Khaani's mother gets up from dinner to read *shukrana ki nafil*, a supplementary kind of *namaz*, which the creators chose not to render visually on screen. Instead, it is rendered in a much more prosaic filming style with reference to the prayer being made at the dinner table and her exit from the table, and the scene to perform this prayer indexes the depth of her daily ritual practice. The cinematographic contrast between Mir Hadi's mother's desperate invocations for forgiveness (again, *istighfar*) and the understated devotion of Khaani's mother visually expresses lessons about the importance of piety as it should be taught in the family. These scenes are made available to viewers as signs ripe for enregisterment and carrying forward across their reception practices and into new digitally mediated worlds.

The visual presence of *namaz* and invocations to God for help are central to the character development and narrative arc of *Khaani*. As the late Asma Nabeel, *Khaani*'s writer and director, noted about the new trend in making socially conscious dramas, "the narrative trajectory is the same, but the reason is the social issue." While the making of *Khaani* stands partially in contrast to earlier narratives focused more centrally on domestic issues by taking up the social effects of feudal political power,

Nabeel's religious visual culture, especially symbolically rich depictions of prayer, are essential plot devices in the developmental arc of the narratives in these later dramas as well.

In discussing the impact of *Khaani* on the industry, Asma and other members of her team that I spoke with took pride in how it forged a new model for successful drama that could advance a "progressive" social agenda.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, personal outcomes of redemption, self-betterment, and atonement in depictions of pious action are characteristic features of both more traditional (i.e., *saas-bahu*, or mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) and (sometimes self-described progressive) social dramas.⁴⁵

Conclusion

By attending to the visual elements of these three dramas, I have offered a critical reading of depictions of prayer and piety alongside broader debates in the industry around image-making and religion. The affective intensity of visual elements is central to the televisual form. Emerging from the close viewing and ethnographic encounters with creators of these serials, I have highlighted the importance of dramas' visuality for grounding an ongoing debate of what constitutes idealized or normative notions of piety for the industry. Various practices, from distinctive enactments of *namaz* and *istighfar* to the displacement of justice in the *akhira* (afterlife), establish a productive semiotic field where *iman* (belief), *mazhabiyat* (religiosity), *taqwa* (devotion or God-consciousness), and *deen* (religion) are not only in play but actively at work in animating the internal worlds of dramas.

I have demonstrated that the visual culture of Pakistani dramas, with close attention to scenes in and around *namaz*, generally adheres to a standard set of televisual practices. Most prayer scenes focus on women, while male piety is more rarely considered. *Khaani* broke with this convention, emphasizing male piety in Mir Hadi's prayers and his path to redemption. Notably, this drama paved the way for more recent dramas with a greater spotlight on pious male leads, including *Raqs-e Bismil*, *Ehd-e Wafa*, and *Parizaad*. Yet despite this more broadly inclusive gender focus, the *namaz* scenes in *Khaani* adhere to the expected attention to women's observance of pious norms, with these being deployed across scenes as an affective plot device, indexing moments of vulnerability and ultimate submission to God's will.

Similarly, the materiality of pious objects plays a central role in producing the visual culture of *namaz*. Prayers mainly occur in spaces with austere set design. "Adornment" in the room is often limited to flowers, lighting effects, or calligraphic wall pieces. Audience critiques of prayer-appropriate dress (e.g., not wearing a dupatta in the SZ *wuzu* scene) highlight expectations around costume design choices

⁴⁴ Munira Cheema discusses more widely how producers of dramas and other "women's television" (religious talk shows, breakfast shows, etc.) envision their content as "empowering" (Munira Cheema, "The Production and Reception of Gender-based Content in Pakistani Television Culture," Ph.D. diss., University of Sussex, 2015 [https://sussex.figshare.com/articles/thesis/The_production_and_reception_of_gender_based_content_in_Pakistani_television_culture/23417237] (accessed September 30, 2023)).

⁴⁵ One online observer noted that the show had an important lesson about shifting fixation "from material love to finding eternal peace within oneself." Saman Siddiqui, "Writer Asma Nabeel Talks about New Drama Serial Baandi," June 5, 2018 (<https://www.oyeyeah.com/celebrity/writer-asma-nabeel-talks-new-drama-serial-baandi-starring-aiman-khan-muneeb-butt/> [accessed September 30, 2023]).

for devotionally salient scenes. Indeed, these are *primarily* performed within normativized frames, with muted colors and “traditional” attire. Objects like the *tasbih* (prayer beads) in *MZ*, the *chador* and Qur’an in *SZ*, and Mir Hadi’s *topi* (prayer cap) in *Khaani* augment the piety on display, especially during critical scenes where *namaz* (prescribed prayers), *duas* (protective prayers), and *zikr* (invocations to God) mark shifts in character development typically toward more pious habitus. In the three dramas I have analyzed here—*MZZB*, *SZ*, and *Khaani*—the incorporation of these pious objects into the “every day” habituations of characters signals a complete integration of piety as a central part of a spiritually rich life.

How final cuts of dramas are shaped emerge from the behind-the-scenes engagements with further individualized ideas of “correctness” (*durustagi*). These connections between reception by audiences and the practices on set underscore the visually salient aspect of contestation in the continued shaping of an Islamic tradition for the urban middle-class Pakistani public. The media observations and industry actors’ practices in this article help reflect on visual practices that seek to discursively sidestep the question of how to surface these issues. Instead, they shed light on how a carefully crafted aesthetic of personal piety is a prominent feature of the visual culture in dramas. Drama creators recognize how this nuance in favor of visual signifiers over discursive ones allows for their works to be impactful for their public. One of the creators behind *MZZM* expressed that “people do see a cultural impact, and they look at these dramas to think about how to live their lives.” An interlocutor from the *SZ* team described how “there is an audience that says ‘this changed my life. I started to look at life in a different way. I found God. I started worshipping again.’”

Viewing these dramas in conjunction with ethnographic observations around how production practices reinscribe receptions points to a robust set of pious affects that these dramas produce. It draws attention to how religion is left *discursively* unmarked and is instead deployed with visual indexes of piety. While the visuality of prayer scenes emphasizes personal piety, paying attention to how pious culture gets depicted offers a critical piece of the puzzle of how increasingly technologized worlds shape people’s perceptions about what it means to be a good Muslim.

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