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Melodrama and the Postcolonial Archive: Aesthetics, Ideology, and the Documentary Voice in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of melodrama as a structuring aesthetic in Pakistani documentary film and television, arguing that its presence constitutes not merely a stylistic inheritance but a postcolonial legacy whose origins lie in the conditions of film production under the British Raj. Drawing on documentary output from three institutional voices — state media organisations (Pakistan Television Corporation, Directorate of Films and Publications, Inter-Services Public Relations), commercial television channels, and independent women filmmakers — the article traces two distinct melodramatic traditions in Pakistani cinema: the female-oriented Urdu weepie modelled on Hollywood melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s, and the hyper-violent anti-feudal Punjabi cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. Both traditions, it is argued, have migrated into documentary in ways that serve specific ideological, commercial, and political purposes. The article brings together Peter Brooks' rehabilitation of melodrama as a political form, Bill Nichols' concept of epistophilia, and postcolonial theory to argue that Pakistani documentary deploys the pleasures of melodrama as a rhetorical vehicle for constructing particular versions of national history and identity. Far from being a concession to popular taste, melodrama in Pakistani documentary is a deliberate apparatus of persuasion.

Keywords: Pakistani documentary, melodrama, postcolonial cinema, epistophilia, PTV, docudrama, South Asian film

Introduction

In an essay on the emotional tendencies of Pakistani film audiences, the Pakistani satirist and humorist Shaukat Thanvi, writing in the final years of his career, observed that cinema's hold on its viewers lay in its capacity to transport them into 'a dreamy, imaginal and romantic world filled with melodramatic scenarios' (Dadi, 2010, p. 13, citing Thanvi; see also Dadi, 2022). The observation was intended as a complaint — a lament that popular cinema was squandering its potential for civic education by immersing its audiences in sentiment. Yet Thanvi's critique inadvertently illuminated something more consequential: that in Pakistan, the emotional texture of cinematic representation had become so saturated with melodramatic convention as to constitute the default grammar of the moving image. What his critique did not anticipate was that this grammar would persist not only in commercial fiction cinema but migrate, with



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equal force, into documentary — a form ostensibly committed to the representation of the historical world.

The question of melodrama in documentary is not unique to Pakistan. The use of dramatic reconstruction, heightened emotional appeal, moral polarisation, and spectacular effect has a long history in non-fiction filmmaking globally, from Robert Flaherty's staged ethnographies to the docudramas of the BBC and the infotainment formats of contemporary television. What distinguishes the Pakistani case is the particular genealogy of its melodramatic inheritance, the specific institutional contexts through which it flows, and the ideological work it is called upon to perform. In Pakistan, melodrama in documentary is not a mere stylistic residue; it is a technology of historical meaning-making, deployed by state media organisations to legitimate an Islamic national ideology, by commercial broadcasters to sell history as entertainment, and by independent women filmmakers to construct a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse.

This article traces that inheritance. It begins by revisiting the theorisation of melodrama as a political form, drawing principally on Peter Brooks' landmark study *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976) and Ben Singer's account of melodrama's structural characteristics. It then examines the specific conditions under which melodrama became the dominant aesthetic mode of South Asian cinema during the colonial period, paying particular attention to the restrictions imposed by the British Indian government on political subject matter and the long-term consequences of those restrictions for the cinema of independent Pakistan. The article proceeds to examine the two distinct melodramatic traditions — the female-oriented Urdu weepie and the hyper-violent Punjabi mode — that Pakistani documentary has inherited, before turning to the three institutional voices through which Pakistani documentary has deployed these inheritances for competing ideological purposes. It concludes by arguing, following Bill Nichols, that melodrama in Pakistani documentary functions as a vehicle of epistophilia — a pleasure of knowing — that renders the documentary's rhetorical address to its audiences particularly potent.

Melodrama Reconsidered: A Political Form

For much of the twentieth century, 'melodrama' carried a pejorative charge. To describe a work as melodramatic was to accuse it of excess — of sensationalism, sentimentality, and a failure of intellectual rigour. The form's associations with popular theatrical traditions, mass audiences, and the transparently manipulated emotions of female spectators made it appear, to many critics, the antithesis of serious representation. It was precisely this association that Peter Brooks set out to overturn in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, first published in 1976. Brooks restored to melodrama a historical specificity and a political function it had been denied. Emerging in the context of the French Revolution — at the moment when the inherited moral frameworks of the ancien régime had been dismantled and no stable replacement was yet in place — melodrama, Brooks argued, was 'a response to the loss of the tragic, as a way of making sense of an amoral cosmos' (Brooks, 1976, p. xi). Its tendency towards moral polarisation, spectacular confrontation, and the violent vindication of the virtuous was not mere entertainment excess: it was a mode of achieving moral legibility in a world where moral categories had become contested.

Brooks' rehabilitation of melodrama as a serious cultural form provided scholars with the tools to analyse it in genres beyond its obvious theatrical home. Marcia Landy, extending Brooks' framework to film and television, demonstrated that melodrama had been



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instrumental in documenting social history by foregrounding the psychological turmoil of individual characters caught within large historical forces. For Landy, melodrama 'provides conflicts and situations which parallel the conflicts and situations experienced by the audience, and the audience, rather than being passive, is actively involved in comparing its situation to those presented in melodrama' (Landy, 1991, pp. 193–194). This interactive dimension — the audience's emotional investment in recognising its own predicament in the melodramatic narrative — makes the form particularly well suited to the documentary's purpose of engaging citizens with historical events.

Ben Singer offers a complementary account in *Melodrama and Modernity* (2001), nominating five structural characteristics of the form: 'strong pathos; heightened emotionality; moral polarization; nonclassical narrative mechanics; and spectacular effects' (Singer, 2001, p. 7). These characteristics have become the standard vocabulary for identifying melodrama across genres and media. Singer's framework is particularly useful for the analysis of documentary because it allows us to identify melodramatic elements even in works that make no claim to the genre — a PTV docudrama that heightens the emotional stakes of a military engagement, a commercial television documentary that polarises the moral positions of its protagonists, an independent film that elicits pathos for its subaltern subjects. The melodramatic mode, in other words, is a set of rhetorical strategies available to any filmmaker working in any form.

What makes melodrama politically effective, however, is precisely what has made it theoretically suspect: its appeal to emotion rather than reason. Van Der Hoven and Arnott (2009), writing in a South African context, argue that melodrama 'as cinematic genre and cultural mode, explicitly draws our attention away from film as right representation to the communicative possibilities inherent in other dimensions of the cinematic experience' (p. 164). That is, melodrama displaces the question of representational accuracy by substituting for it the question of emotional truth. The audience is not invited to evaluate the historical record; it is invited to feel the rightness of a particular version of events. In the context of documentary — a form whose claim to authority rests precisely on its relationship to the historical world — this displacement carries significant ideological consequences.

Colonial Censorship and the Birth of South Asian Melodrama

The melodramatic tradition of Pakistani cinema cannot be understood in isolation from the specific conditions under which cinema developed in colonial India. The British Indian government maintained a systematic policy of preventing the nascent Indian film industry from taking up political or anti-colonial subject matter. Ahmed (2016) has documented this policy's effects: 'colonial authorities ensured that Indian cinema did not address themes related to the ongoing freedom struggle. On the other hand, mythological and pre-colonial historical epics were permitted.' The result was a cinema confined, in its contemporary registers, to romantic and domestic narratives — the boy-meets-girl story as the permissible terrain of popular Indian filmmaking under the Raj. Political themes that might have animated a cinema of national consciousness were systematically excluded, leaving the emotional energies of audiences to be directed into private and romantic forms.

This institutional foreclosure of political content had lasting consequences. It embedded in the practice and the expectations of South Asian popular cinema a set of generic conventions — the love story, the suffering heroine, the moral conflict between individual desire and social obligation — that would persist long after the conditions that produced them had changed. The post-independence cinemas of both India and Pakistan



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demonstrated a striking continuity with this colonial inheritance. Films produced in the immediate aftermath of Partition largely avoided the political and communal violence that had precipitated it, retreating instead into the familiar generic conventions of romance and melodrama. The psychic costs of Partition, the crisis of national identity, the violence of displacement — none of these found immediate cinematic expression. Pakistani cinema, in its earliest phase, was not silent about history because it lacked the technical or narrative means to address it; it was silent because its representational repertoire had been formed under conditions designed to prevent that address.

It is in this context that the emergence of melodrama as the dominant aesthetic mode of South Asian cinema must be understood. Melodrama did not simply arrive as a Hollywood import, though Hollywood's influence on South Asian film aesthetics was substantial. It developed as the form best suited to the emotional and social conditions of audiences whose political experiences had been systematically excluded from their national cinema. The pathos of the love story, the spectacle of suffering, the moral polarisation between virtue and vice — these provided a displaced register for experiences and aspirations that could not be named directly. The colonial censorship that had originally driven political content from the screen had not extinguished the political energies of audiences; it had redirected them into the emotional channels that melodrama held open.

Said's (1979, 1994) account of the relationship between colonial discourse and the representational practices of colonised societies provides a useful framework for understanding this dynamic. Said argues that colonialism did not merely occupy territory; it produced systems of knowledge and representation that organised the self-understanding of colonised peoples in ways that served imperial interests (Said, 1979, p. 94; Said, 1994, p. xi). The restriction of Indian cinema to apolitical subject matter was one instance of this broader project: the management of representation as a form of power. What the colonial archive foreclosed, the melodramatic imagination found other ways to express. The legacy of that foreclosure — the habit of displacing political engagement into emotional and moral registers — was carried into the cinema of independent Pakistan and eventually into its documentary tradition.

Two Melodramas: Urdu Weepie and Punjabi Hyper-Violence

Pakistani popular cinema developed, after independence, two distinct melodramatic traditions that have left different but equally legible traces in the country's documentary practice. The first — associated primarily with Urdu-language commercial cinema — followed the Hollywood model of the domestic melodrama, what Singer (2001) describes as the tradition of films 'centering around a sympathetic heroine [which] deals with the pathos of misplaced love and obstructed marriage, generational friction and the pressures of filling an impossible maternal space' (p. 38). These films, modelled on the Hollywood weepies of the 1930s and 1940s, assumed a predominantly female audience whose emotional investments were channelled into private, romantic, and familial narratives. The political history of Pakistan — the contested Partition, the wars with India, the cycles of military government and democratic transition — remained largely outside the frame of this melodramatic tradition.

The second tradition — associated with Punjabi-language commercial cinema, particularly from the 1970s onwards — represented a striking departure from the domestic register of the Urdu film. Its emergence is inseparable from the specific political conditions of Pakistan in the aftermath of the 1971 separation of East Pakistan. Dadi (2010) has argued that the decline of mainstream Urdu cinema and the subsequent



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rise of hyper-violent Punjabi cinema aligned with ‘Punjabi identity [after the loss of East Pakistan] with a new imagination’ (p. 13). Where the Urdu melodrama channelled emotional energy into private suffering, the Punjabi film directed it outward, into violence, vengeance, and the confrontation of a corrupt social order. Khan and Ahmad (2010) identify the two films that crystallised this genre — *Wehshi Jat* (1975) and *Maula Jatt* (1979) — as establishing ‘the genre of hyper-violent Punjabi cinema, typically a vigilante and outlaw response to rural exploitation ... also enacting an allegory of the repression instigated by General Zia ul-Haq’s martial law regime’ (p. 154).

The figure of Sultan Rahi, who emerged as the defining star of this genre, embodied its politics with particular clarity. Where the heroes of Urdu cinema were, as Khan and Ahmad (2010) note, ‘well groomed, attired in stylishly tailored suits, softly spoken and made in the image of their former colonial masters,’ Rahi ‘represented a subaltern constituency — the groups targeted by Bhutto’s People’s Party government which had come to power on the promise of Roti, Kapda aur Makaan’ (p. 154). The Punjabi hero was not the gentleman of the colonial order; he was its antithesis — a man of the land, speaking the language of the dispossessed, enacting a fantasy of popular justice against feudal lords who symbolised the persistence of colonial exploitation under a Pakistani guise. Gazdar’s (1997) account of this cinema confirms that its melodramatic excess was not culturally accidental but historically specific: the hyper-violent Punjabi film was an expression of resistance, however displaced and fantasmatic, against the dictatorial regime of General Ziaul Haq.

Both melodramatic traditions are significant for the analysis of Pakistani documentary because they shaped not only the aesthetic vocabulary available to documentary filmmakers but also the emotional expectations of the audiences those filmmakers addressed. The documentary maker working in Pakistan could not assume an audience innocent of melodramatic convention; she worked with and against an audience conditioned by decades of melodramatic cinema to experience narrative as an arena of moral conflict, emotional intensity, and spectacular confrontation. The documentary’s claim to represent the historical world was thus always mediated by the melodramatic grammar through which Pakistani audiences had learned to receive moving-image stories.

Three Institutional Voices, Three Melodramatic Registers

Pakistani documentary has been produced, since the 1970s, by three institutional voices whose different ideological, political, and commercial priorities have determined not only what stories they tell but how they tell them. The state media organisations — Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV), the Directorate of Films and Publications (DFP), and the Inter-Services Public Relations directorate of the Pakistan Army (ISPR) — represent the dominant voice, whose discourse is governed by the Islamic ideology of the state. Commercial television channels, operating under the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) Ordinance of 2002, represent a more ambivalent voice: formally independent, but operating within regulatory constraints that prevent radical departure from the national ideology, and commercially motivated in ways that significantly shape their representational choices. Independent women filmmakers represent the third and most contested voice: producing a counter-discourse to the state’s Islamic ideology, but dependent on western funding sources whose own interests complicate any straightforward claim to autonomy.

Each of these institutional voices deploys melodrama differently, in ways that correspond to its specific purposes and constraints.



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5.1 State Media: The Melodrama of National Virtue

The documentary output of PTV, the DFP, and the ISPR is shaped by an overriding ideological commitment: the legitimization of the Islamic ideology of Pakistan and, through it, the authority of the state and the Pakistan Army. Within this framework, melodrama performs a specific and highly controlled function. The docudramas produced by these organisations — particularly those depicting the wars of 1965 and 1971 and the heroic figures of Pakistan's national history — structure their narratives around the binary oppositions that Singer (2001) identifies as constitutive of melodrama: virtue against vice, sacrifice against betrayal, national devotion against treachery. The villains of these narratives — typically India, its armed forces, or the domestic agents of external influence — are drawn with the moral clarity that Brooks (1976) identified as characteristic of melodrama's response to a world whose moral framework has been destabilised (p. x).

The consequences of this melodramatic structure for the documentary's relationship to historical truth are significant. In a docudrama produced under state sponsorship, the question of historical accuracy is subordinated to the question of moral legibility. The viewer is not invited to evaluate competing accounts of a historical event but to feel the rightness of the nation's cause, the wrongness of its enemies, and the virtue of its heroes. This emotional address is not incidental to the historical claim being made; it is its mechanism. The melodramatic narrative does not represent history; it adjudicates it, delivering a verdict in the register of feeling that the documentary's claim to factual authority then ratifies.

The relationship between the PTV and the ISPR in this production culture is particularly revealing. Their joint productions, including the docudramas examined in the chapters that follow, were subject to deep scrutiny at every stage of production. As former PTV producer Salim Tahir has confirmed, 'a documentary involving the Pakistan Army inevitably goes through deep scrutiny during all stages of its production' (S. Tahir, personal communication, September 2015). This scrutiny was not primarily concerned with factual accuracy; it was concerned with ideological conformity — with ensuring that the melodramatic narrative served the interests of the institutional voice from which it issued. The editorial freedom of the individual filmmaker was constrained not by documentary's commitment to the historical world but by the state's commitment to its own version of that world.

Lipkin's (2002) account of the rhetorical logic of docudrama is illuminating here. Lipkin argues that the docudrama recruits emotional engagement in the service of argument: its 'real emotional logic' lies in its capacity to make the viewer feel the justice of a particular position rather than merely understand it intellectually (p. 37). In state-sponsored Pakistani docudrama, this emotional logic is enlisted in the service of ideological legitimization. The viewer who weeps at the sacrifice of a shaheed (martyr) soldier, or feels outrage at the enemy's treachery, has been persuaded by affect of a version of history that serves the state's political interests. The melodrama is the mechanism; the ideology is the end.

Commercial Television: The Melodrama of Sensation

The emergence of commercial television in Pakistan after the PEMRA Ordinance of 2002 introduced a different melodramatic mode — one governed not by ideological fidelity but by the logic of the market. Former Geo TV and Dunya TV executive Faisal Sher-Jan has described the constraints on commercial documentary production with characteristic candour: the channels' approach to programming is 'governed by



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commercial appeal of the topics and style of production ... that is what the prime time asks, which they can easily sell' (F. Sher-Jan, personal communication, June 2016). The historical documentaries produced by commercial channels — addressing such subjects as martial law, the fall of East Pakistan in 1971, and the roles of individual military and political figures — are shaped by the dual imperative of generating ratings and avoiding regulatory sanction.

The melodramatic mode adopted by commercial documentary in Pakistan reflects these dual pressures. On one hand, commercial television has used melodrama — specifically, the hyper-violent tradition of the Punjabi cinema rather than the domestic register of the Urdu weepie — to render historical content emotionally compelling for mass audiences. The techniques identified by Thussu (2007) in his account of global infotainment — 'the dramatic visual spectacle of violence and death,' 'flashy graphics, fast-paced editing, music, and sound effects,' and 'the use of sensationalism or satire' (pp. 1, 113) — are visible in commercial Pakistani documentary's treatment of military history, political crisis, and social conflict. History becomes, in this register, a spectacle of confrontation: generals and politicians as melodramatic protagonists, their conflicts rendered with the moral polarisation that audiences have been trained by cinema to expect.

On the other hand, the PEMRA Ordinance imposes significant constraints on how far commercial channels can depart from the state's ideological framework. The Ordinance requires licence holders to 'ensure preservation of the sovereignty, security and integrity of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan' and to maintain the 'national, cultural, social and religious values ... enshrined in the Constitution' (PEMRA Ordinance 2002 [Amended 2007], p. 18). As Sher-Jan has observed, channels that attempt to deviate from this framework face regulatory consequences: 'If they try to deviate from this path, they get slapped down' (F. Sher-Jan, personal communication, June 2016). The melodramatic narratives of commercial documentary are therefore shaped by a double constraint: the commercial imperative to sensationalise and the regulatory imperative to remain within the limits of the permissible. The result is a mode of historical representation that deploys melodrama's capacity for emotional arousal while carefully managing the ideological implications of that arousal — channelling sensation into acceptable frameworks.

Zohaib Saleem Butt, a commercial television producer, has observed that Geo TV's documentaries are 'highly commercial ... their titles are commercial too, like the titles of TV dramas. They also advertise documentaries like commercial dramas' (Z. S. Butt, personal communication, August 2015). This observation points to a fundamental tension in commercial documentary's relationship to the historical record: the adoption of fiction cinema's marketing strategies for non-fiction content implicitly redefines the viewer's relationship to the material, inviting a mode of emotional engagement associated with entertainment rather than historical education. The viewer who tunes in to a commercial television documentary about the fall of Dhaka is not primarily invited to reflect on a historical event; she is invited to experience it as a dramatic spectacle in whose emotional stakes she has a personal investment.

Women Filmmakers: The Melodrama of Witness

The melodramatic mode deployed by independent Pakistani women filmmakers constitutes the most complex and theoretically productive of the three institutional registers. Where state media deploys melodrama in the service of a dominant national ideology and commercial television deploys it in the service of market imperatives, the documentary practice of filmmakers such as Shireen Pasha, Sabiha Sumar, Beena Sarwar, and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy recruits melodrama as a mode of witnessing — a



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way of making visible the suffering that the dominant discourse systematically obscures. The melodramatic tradition of the Hollywood weepie, with its centring of female suffering and its assumption of a female audience's emotional identification with a vulnerable heroine, is the inheritance most directly visible in the documentary practice of these filmmakers. The subjects of their documentaries — women caught in the violence of honour culture, the restrictions of Shariah law, the marginalisation imposed by the Hudood Ordinance — are precisely the kind of 'sympathetic heroines' whose 'pathos of misplaced love and obstructed marriage, generational friction and the pressures of filling an impossible maternal space' Singer (2001, p. 38) identifies as the core subject matter of the Hollywood weepie. Yet the political function of this melodramatic mode in women's documentary is very different from its function in its Hollywood antecedent.

Where the Hollywood weepie typically absorbed its heroine's suffering into a narrative of individual romantic resolution, the documentary practice of Pakistani women filmmakers refuses this privatisation of female pain. The suffering of the individual women documented in these films is consistently placed within a political and historical context — the Islamisation policies of Ziaul Haq, the feudal-tribal structures of Pakistani society, the patriarchal organisation of both state and civil institutions. The personal is insisted upon as political; the private is exposed as the product of public and institutional violence. In this way, these filmmakers mobilise the emotional resources of the melodramatic mode — its capacity to generate identification, pathos, and moral outrage — in the service of a political argument that the dominant discourse actively suppresses.

Bruzzi's (2006) argument about the relationship between documentary and performance is illuminating here. Bruzzi maintains that the documentary 'only comes into being as it is performed, that although its factual basis (or document) can pre-date any recording or representation of it, the film itself is necessarily performative because it is given meaning by the interaction between performance and reality' (p. 186). In the work of Pakistani women documentarians, this performative dimension is particularly charged: the subject's act of speaking before the camera, of rendering visible a suffering that has been rendered invisible, is simultaneously a documentary act and a melodramatic one. The woman who tells her story to the camera is not merely providing factual testimony; she is performing a claim upon the viewer's emotional recognition — a claim whose melodramatic force is inseparable from its political significance.

Sarwar has articulated this practice with notable clarity: 'I take up issues — women's rights, freedom of expression, Zia's Islamisation, conflict between the harsher version of Islam and the Sufi culture of the sub-continent ... I try to focus on the individual and use them to tell a larger story; and add context to the individual's story to set it in a larger social, historical, political perspective' (B. Sarwar, personal communication, November 2016). The movement Sarwar describes — from the individual's story to the larger historical context and back — is characteristic of melodrama's dialectic between private emotion and public significance. Landy (1991) identifies precisely this movement as melodrama's key political resource: its capacity to make historical forces palpable through their inscription on individual bodies and lives (p. 194).

Epistophilia and the Rhetorical Voice

The analysis of melodrama's three institutional registers in Pakistani documentary requires, finally, a theoretical account of how melodrama serves the documentary's fundamental rhetorical purpose: the persuasion of audiences to a particular view of the historical world. Nichols (1991) provides the key concept in his notion of 'epistophilia' — a pleasure of knowing that documentary mobilises in its audiences. Nichols argues



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that documentary 'align[s] itself with an epistophilia, so to speak, a pleasure of knowing, that marks out a distinctive form of social engagement. The engagement stems from the rhetorical force of an argument about the very world we inhabit ... [casting] a stronger effect on our social imagination and a sense of cultural identity' (p. 178).

Melodrama, in Pakistani documentary, is precisely the vehicle through which this epistophilic engagement is intensified. The emotional investments that melodrama generates — in heroes, in victims, in villains, in moral outcomes — are not merely supplementary to the documentary's cognitive claim upon its audience; they are its most effective mechanism. When a PTV docudrama generates in its viewer a profound emotional identification with a soldier's sacrifice, it has created a form of knowledge — a felt knowledge of the rightness of a national cause — that may be more durable and more persuasive than any explicitly propositional claim. When a women's documentary generates in its viewer an experience of outrage and grief at the treatment of its subject, it has produced a form of knowing that functions as moral conviction.

The relationship between melodrama and the 'voice of documentary' — Nichols' (1983) concept of the documentary's social point of view, the sense of 'a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us' (p. 18) — is thus one of mutual constitution. The voice of Pakistani documentary is inseparable from its melodramatic register; the documentary's claim to speak about the historical world is made effective, in each of its institutional registers, by melodrama's capacity to render that claim emotionally compelling. Plantinga's (1997) distinction between the documentary's 'formal voice' (which 'assumes an epistemic authority; it raises questions and answers them') and its 'open voice' (which is 'epistemically hesitant') (p. 108) is, in the Pakistani case, inflected by melodrama in ways that collapse this distinction: the formal voice of Pakistani state documentary speaks with an authority that is simultaneously epistemic and emotional, its claims to historical truth inseparable from the affective charge through which they are delivered.

This analysis has significant implications for how we understand the politics of representation in Pakistani documentary. Sobchack's (1999) account of documentary spectatorship argues that identification with documentary images depends on 'our existential and cultural knowledge, but also our partial lack of it — a lack that modifies the nature of identification with the image' (p. 243). In the Pakistani context, this partial lack — the absence, for most viewers, of direct access to the historical events being represented — is precisely the condition that melodrama exploits. Where the viewer cannot compare the documentary's representation against her own experience of events, she is dependent on the emotional logic of the narrative for her sense of what those events meant. Melodrama fills the gap that epistemological uncertainty opens up; it provides, in the register of feeling, the certainty that the historical record cannot supply.

This is why the three institutional voices of Pakistani documentary, despite their radically different ideological positions, all converge on melodrama as their preferred mode: melodrama works. It works for the state, which needs to make its version of national history feel self-evidently true. It works for commercial television, which needs to make history feel urgently entertaining. And it works for independent women filmmakers, who need to make the suffering of their subjects feel morally intolerable. In each case, melodrama's capacity to render historical claims as felt truths — to transform facts into evidence, in Nichols' (2016, pp. 99–106) formulation, through the force of emotional address — makes it the most effective available vehicle for the documentary's fundamental project.



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The Postcolonial Archive and Its Emotional Grammar

There is, finally, a deeper point to be made about the relationship between melodrama and the postcolonial condition that Pakistani documentary inhabits. The postcolonial state, as Masters-Waage (2011) has observed, typically confronts problems of identity and legitimacy that are structural consequences of its colonial history — contested borders, imposed institutions, a national identity that must be constructed rather than inherited. Pakistan faces these problems with particular acuity: its borders are disputed (with India over Kashmir, with Afghanistan over the Durand Line), its national identity is contested (between Islamic and secular, Punjabi and multi-ethnic, colonial and indigenous definitions), and its relationship to its own history is deeply ambivalent (the Partition, the separation of East Pakistan, the cycles of military rule all resist easy incorporation into any stable national narrative).

In this context, the melodramatic mode is not simply a stylistic preference; it is a structural response to the impossibility of stable historical representation. Where the historical record is contested, where the nation's narrative is unfinished and unresolved, melodrama provides a form of provisional closure — a way of rendering the open questions of history as resolved conflicts between virtue and vice. Brooks' (1976) insight that melodrama emerged as a response to moral disorientation — as a way of achieving legibility in a world whose moral frameworks had been destroyed (p. x) — applies with particular force to the postcolonial condition. The historical disorientation of the postcolonial nation finds in melodrama precisely the form of moral organisation it needs. This is visible in the specific content of Pakistani documentary's melodramatic narratives. The state's docudramas structure the nation's history as a series of confrontations between Islamic virtue and Hindu or western aggression — a melodramatic schema that converts the ambiguities of historical conflict into the moral clarity of good versus evil. The commercial television documentaries that examine the role of military governments narrate those governments' histories as conflicts between democratic virtue and authoritarian vice — a different melodramatic schema, but one that equally converts historical complexity into moral drama. The women filmmakers' documentaries narrate their subjects' experiences as confrontations between individual dignity and patriarchal violence — yet another melodramatic schema, but one whose moral claims are directed not at external enemies but at internal structures of power. What these different melodramatic schemas share is their common inheritance from the colonial period: the habit, formed under the conditions of imperial censorship and cultural management, of processing historical experience through the grammar of emotion rather than the grammar of critical reflection. The postcolonial archive is, in this sense, an emotional archive — a repertoire of melodramatic conventions whose persistence in Pakistani documentary is both the consequence of its colonial history and a symptom of the unfinished work of that history's resolution.

Conclusion

This article has argued that melodrama in Pakistani documentary is neither accidental nor merely aesthetic. It is a structural feature whose genealogy lies in the specific conditions of cinema under colonial rule in South Asia, whose persistence reflects the unresolved political and historical contradictions of postcolonial Pakistan, and whose deployment by three distinct institutional voices — state media, commercial television, and independent women filmmakers — serves three distinct but equally ideologically invested purposes.

The state media organisations of Pakistan deploy melodrama to render the Islamic ideology of the nation emotionally self-evident — to make the virtue of the national



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cause, the wickedness of its enemies, and the heroism of its defenders feel like historical truths rather than ideological constructions. Commercial television deploys melodrama to render history entertaining — to produce a form of historical knowledge that generates ratings by generating feeling. Independent women filmmakers deploy melodrama to render female suffering morally intolerable — to produce, in the viewer, the sense that the structures which produce that suffering are not merely unjust but obscene.

In each case, melodrama functions as the documentary's most effective rhetorical tool: its capacity to produce felt knowledge — to convert historical claims into emotional convictions — makes it the vehicle through which Pakistani documentary's three institutional voices exercise their power over their audiences' sense of the past. Nichols' (1991) concept of epistophilia identifies the pleasure at stake in this process: the pleasure of knowing, of having one's sense of how the world works confirmed by the emotional logic of a narrative. In Pakistani documentary, that pleasure is inseparable from melodrama's moral grammar — its insistence on the clarity of virtue and vice, its investment in the suffering of the innocent, its demand that history yield a judgment.

The melodramatic inheritance of Pakistani documentary is, ultimately, a postcolonial inheritance: a form shaped by colonial constraint, maintained by institutional need, and deployed in the service of the still-unresolved question of what Pakistan's history means and whose Pakistan it is. That question, this article has suggested, cannot be answered by documentary alone — but it can be felt, with extraordinary intensity, through the melodramatic voice in which Pakistani documentary continues to ask it.

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