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A Postmodern Study of Micronarratives in Selected Muslim Documentaries

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Abstract
This study is concerned with the postmodern analysis of the Oscar Winning documentaries by Muslim filmmakers, namely, Saving Face (2012) and A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015). The goal of this study is to examine that how these documentaries have served as a platform that has brought the marginalized narratives to the center. This study has used Lyotard's (1984) concept of Incredulity towards Metanarratives as a theoretical framework in order to analyze that how the selected documentaries have shown disillusionment towards the grand and overarching narratives of the (Western) world. This study has also explored different postmodern techniques that are used in these documentaries. For this purpose, this study has employed Catharine. A MacKinnon's Dominance Feminism (1987) in order to analyze that how the documentaries Saving Face (2012), and A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015) have shown the dark reality of patriarchy where men use dominance as a tool to control women. This research is significant as it has explored, through the use of postmodern techniques, the centering of the de-centered subject(s). And this research has also explored that how these documentaries have served as platform to highlight the dark aspects of oppressive patriarchy. Findings of this research reveal that the documentaries have challenged the dominant narratives regarding men and their supremacy, particularly with regard to Muslim societies where women challenge men's dominance and contest the narratives regarding the marginalization of women.

Keywords: Postmodernism, micronarratives, macronarratives, dominance feminism

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1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, the importance of audio-visual medium for the portrayal of narratives cannot be negated. Documentaries serve as a medium that reflect social issues without fabricating them. Documentaries serve as a medium for spreading awareness among masses regarding the issues that usually get ignored by the mainstream media. The Oscars is one of the most prestigious awards in the world. Presented every year by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) in the United States, the Oscars celebrate excellence in film making in diverse categories such as writing, acting, directing, cinematography, and overall best picture. It was first held in 1929. The ceremony has now become one of the most popular events in the world. For many artists, especially from developing or marginalized regions, winning an Oscar is more than an individual success. This win enables them to bring their point of view and the sufferings of their country and people to the global spotlight. The present study explores Oscar winning Muslim documentaries *Saving Face (2012)* by Pakistani director Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy and American director Daniel Junge, and *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015)* directed by Pakistani director Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy. This study has explored that how through the use of postmodern techniques these documentaries have brought into light the sufferings of the margin. This study has used Lyotard's notion of Incredulity towards Metanarratives (1984) and MacKinnon's *Dominance Feminism (1987)* in order to analyze that how these Oscar winning documentaries by Muslim filmmakers have centered the micronarratives. This study has analyzed that how the suffering of as well as the resistance from the people occupying the marginal space is brought into light.

2. Literature Review

This section briefly reviews the relevant studies on the selected documentaries. Rehman et al. (2020) have done an analysis of *Saving Face (2012)* by Sharmeen

Obaid Chinoy. This work explored that how gender is represented in this documentary. This study used Peirce's theory of sign. The analysis of this work has shown two findings: one is that men are generally given more respect and importance than women in public places and second finding is that in some sections of society these gender roles get challenged.

Rafi (2019) has analyzed documentaries of Chinoy. This work has done an extensive analysis of social and cultural factors and discovered that the ideology of honour embedded in honour killing plays a vital role spreading this crime. This study has also explored the role of society in binding women from taking any stand against the oppressive patriarchal crimes.

Nasir (2018) has done an analysis *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015)* by using Fairclough's three dimensional model. This work has done an extensive analysis of language used by characters in the documentary.

The review of relevant literature has revealed that different researchers have explored different works from postmodern perspective but not a sufficient amount of work has been done in order to specifically explore the Oscar Winning documentaries by Muslim filmmakers from postmodern perspective that how these documentaries center the margin by embracing micronarratives instead of talking about dominant macronarratives.

3. Research Questions

This study is premised upon the following research questions. The first being that in what ways do the documentaries *Saving Face (2012)* and *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015)* highlight the sufferings of the margin by challenging the metanarratives? The second question explores the kind of postmodern techniques used in *Saving Face (2012*) and *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015).*

4. Research Methodology & Theoretical Framework

This study has adopted qualitative and interpretive design of research in order to get an in depth understanding of the documentaries. Qualitative research design allows the researcher to uncover the message that these documentaries convey. This study has adopted purposive sampling method to select the dialogues most relevant to the goal of this study. Present study has used Lyotard's Incredulity towards metanarratives (1984) and Catherine A.Mackinnon's *Dominance Feminism (1987)* as theoretical framework in order to get an insight into the documentaries. Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in 1979 in which Lyotard criticized dominant and overarching narratives, the metanarratives. These are the metanarratives that tell totalizing and generalizing stories about human success/existence instead of embracing individuality and subjectivity. Mackinnon (1987) has described that how men try to push women to an inferior position in a society through the use of abuse and violence. Mackinnon (1987) has also highlighted the dark reality of patriarchy that uses dominance as a tool to undermine women.

5. *Saving Face* (2012): A Postmodern Perspective

This section deals with the analysis of the documentary *Saving Face (2012)* from the perspective of postmodernism by using Lyotard's (1984) concept of incredulity towards metanarratives to explore how the documentary centers the suffering of women by challenging the dominant metanarratives of patriarchy. This section analyzes various postmodern techniques that are used in this documentary. This section also explores the documentary from the perspective of Catharine A. Mackinnon's (1987*) Dominance Feminism* to explore how the documentary brings into spotlight the dark reality of patriarchy where men abuse power in order to suppress women.

The first section of analysis focuses upon the Oscar Winning Muslim Documentary *Saving Face (2012)* through the postmodern lens using Lyotard's Incredulity towards metanarratives (1984) to analyze that how this documentary challenges the dominant and overarching narratives by centering the micronarratives that occupy the marginal space. "I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv).

According to Lyotard (1984), postmodernism embraces narratives that have long been sidelined in the world. This section also analyzes different kinds of postmodern techniques that have been used in this documentary in order to get an insight into how the postmodern way of depicting a story is different from the traditional ways of depicting a story. This documentary shows stories of various acid attack survivors such as Rukhsana, Zakia and many more. Zakia is shown as a woman who no longer accepts the traditional role that expects a woman to stay silent in front of a man and silently bear abuse of men, rather Zakia pursues her legal fight against her husband, Pervaiz, and as result of her legal fight her husband threw acid on her. It is shown in the documentary that Zakia visits her lawyer, Sarkar Abbas. She is a lawyer in high court and she fights Zakia's case. Zakia describes her lawyer in the following way:

> I have found a lawyer. She is especially passionate about women's cases……I don't know how I would've fought this without her (Chinoy, 2012, 14:04).

The above dialogue of Zakia about her lawyer who herself is a female is a representation that how this documentary subverts dominant macronarratives of patriarchy.

At an event, another acid attack survivor, Rukhsana, the victim of an acid attack by her husband, is given to chance to speak in a hall full of people. She stands

on the podium and delivers her speech in which she shares her suffering and asks for justice. She expresses herself in the following way:

> Even our own people do not recognize us any more. This is such an injustice to us. Someone must stop these brutal people who made us into living dead. O my fellow countrymen, my lawmakers, my government, your daughters seek justice from you (Chinoy, 2012,17:41).

The above dialogue was uttered by an acid attack survivor woman in a hall full of people including men and high profile lawmakers. This shows the shift of focus from dominant and overarching narratives to the micronarrative. "Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative" (Lyotard, 1984, p.41).

The way this documentary *Saving Face (2012)* centers the micronarratives can be discussed further by highlighting the postmodern techniques that this documentary has employed. These postmodern techniques show that how the postmodern way of depicting a story challenges the traditional ways of depicting a story in order to embrace micronarratives.

The postmodern techniques that are employed in this documentary have been discussed below:

The use of self-reflexivity is quite prominent in the documentary.

> Self-reflexive products still contain a vital creative spirit which is performed by challenging our taken for granted modes of reception of audio-visual representations (Ciccognani, 2018, p.2).

The documentary *Saving Face (2012)* opens with the following dialogue narrated by a Zakia who is an acid attack survivor.

> I had great passion for taking pictures. Whenever my mother would buy me new clothes, I would wear them and take photographs. Now I feel terrible when I look at these. (Chinoy & Junge, 2012, 0:20).

This dialogue was spoken by an acid attack survivor, Zakia. Here Zakia is directly addressing the audience. Zakia's direct address to audience through looking directly at the camera shows the use of postmodern technique of self-reflexivity in the documentary

At several points, this documentary has also incorporated temporal distortion. Temporal distortion is a postmodern technique that plays with time. In this technique, the story does not move in a straight order but instead it includes some temporal distortion such as flash backs. The use of flashback, a postmodern technique, has been employed at several points in the documentary *Saving Face (2012).*

> My husband threw acid on me and my sister-in-law threw gasoline on me. And then my mother-in-law lit a match and set me on fire (Chinoy, 2012, 08:53).

The above dialogue was uttered by Rukhsana, a victim of acid attack. The story began with Rukhsana taking medical treatment in the hospital and then Rukhsana provides the flashback that actually what happened to her. This shows the presence of temporal distortion in the documentary.

This documentary has also incorporated multiple perspectives at several points. The representation of story from multiple perspectives is a postmodern technique that embraces diversity. The documentary *Saving Face (2012)* presents the story from the perspectives of multiple acid attack survivor women. “In postmodern fiction multiple perspectives are stressed” (Quennet, 2001, p.54).

One acid attack survivor narrates her story of acid attack in the following way:

> My husband burned me. I was sleeping and he came inside and just threw acid on me (Chinoy & Junge, 2012 ,02:04).

Another acid attack survivor shares her story:

> One night I was sleeping, and he came and threw acid on my shoulder…. he came back and threw it on my face. All because we rejected his proposal (Chinoy & Junge, 2012, 02:34).

This shows the presence of multiple perspectives in the documentary.

The second section of analysis of *Saving Face* (2012) looks at this Oscar Winning documentary from the perspective of Catherin A. Mackinnon's Dominance Feminism. This section focuses on how this society has become a sphere where male domination has become a tool that is used by patriarchal society to suppress women. As Catharine A. Mackinnon highlighted in *Feminism Unmodified (1987)* that men use dominance and coercion as tools to undermine a woman's autonomy. And this use of coercion allows men to uphold their dominance in a patriarchal society.

> Gender here is a matter of dominance, not difference. Feminists have noticed that women and men are equally different but not equally powerful (Mackinnon, 1987, p.51).

Mackinnon (1987) has described that how men use force in order to maintain their dominance. It is shown in the documentary that men threw acid on women which shows the use of force to suppress women. Zakia describes details about her abusive marriage and that how she decided to get rid of the abusive marriage by taking divorce from her husband. And just to take revenge of Zakia's perusal of her legal right to get separated from a man who wanted to trap her in an abusive marriage, Zakia's husband, Pervaiz, threw acid on her outside the court.

Mackinnon (1987) has described that gender inequality gives impunity to men to abuse women. It is shown in the documentary that, after throwing acid on Zakia, her husband Pervaiz is arrested by the police but he did not feel ashamed of his act. And when a journalist inquires Pervaiz about his crime he gives the following reply:

Journalist: Are you married?

Pervaiz: Yes

Journalist: What's your wife's name?

Pervaiz: I don't think it's important to tell you that (Chinoy, 2012, 06:49).

The above dialogue uttered by Pervaiz in which he mentions that he does not consider his wife's name as something worthy to be discussed shows that how patriarchy considers women as mere possession and not as human beings worthy of respect. Pervaiz's reply shows the deeply penetrated view that makes men believe that they are the only creature on the earth worthy of respect. The documentary also shows the resistance of women against the abuse of men. Zakia is shown pursuing legal case against her husband, Pervaiz. "Feminism seeks to empower women" (Mackinnon, 1987, p.22). Mackinnon (1987) has explained that how the goal of feminism is to empower women by highlighting the abuse of men. The legal fight of Zakia against her husband shows that she has shown resistance against the abusive patriarchy.

It is represented in the documentary that how in a patriarchal society men consider themselves as the ones who are entitled to use abuse and violence as a tool to control women. And they do not regret abusing women. Rather they consider themselves righteous. Same is the case with Zakia's husband, Pervaiz. He did not seem to be ashamed of what he did to his wife. Zakia describes that how her husband behaved during the hearing at the court:

Whenever I go to court for my hearings, I see no remorse in his eyes. (Chinoy, 2012, 28:11).

The above description of Pervaiz and his behavior during the hearings at court shows that he does not feel ashamed of the heinous act that he did by throwing acid on his wife. Rather his stare at his wife shows that he still thinks that he is the one

who is superior and if he had used violence to control his wife that was his right that he has been given to him by society because of his gender. "Our social treatment certainly is different-the difference between power and powerlessness" (Mackinnon, 1987, p.25).

6. A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015): A Postmodern Perspective

This section deals the analysis of the documentary *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015)* from the perspective of postmodernism by using Lyotard's (1984) concept of incredulity towards metanarratives to explore how the documentary centers the suffering of women by challenging the dominant metanarratives of patriarchy. This section also explores different kinds of postmodern techniques that have been used in the documentary. And this section also uses Catharine A. Mackinnon's (1987) *Dominance Feminism* to explore how the documentary brings into spotlight the dark reality of patriarchy where men abuse power in order to suppress women. The analysis has been, accordingly, divided into two sections: the first section deals with the postmodern perspective and second section deals with Mackinnon's perspective to discuss how this documentary portrays incredulity towards the metanarrative of patriarchy.

"I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv).

Lyotard in his work *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1984)* has defined postmodernism as an epistemology that is skeptical about the grand narratives which he referred to as metanarratives. This section explores that how this documentary highlights the sidelined narrative of a girl named Saba who survived an honour killing attempt by the male members of her family including her father and uncle. The reason behind her father and uncle's attempt to kill her was that she married by her own choice and violated the oppressive patriarchal

norms that consider a woman choosing her life partner as someone who is rebelling against the patriarchal norms.

> The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation (Lyotard, 1984, p.37).

Lyotard (1984) has defined that in postmodern era there is no space for grand and dominant narratives. Rather, postmodernism is an era that embraces the narratives that have long been sidelined from the mainstream. Thus, it can be seen in this documentary that a male dominant narrative that has been at the center in the society gets challenged in this documentary by centering the narrative of a woman that often gets ignored.

> We were very happy…...Qaiser is very gentle and loving, never angry at me (Chinoy, 2015, 05:05).

The above description of Qaiser was provided by Saba. This description provided by Saba shows the centralization of margin, a woman whose choice often gets ignored in a patriarchal society. But this description provided by Saba shows that this documentary gives importance to the view of a woman who did what she liked and what made her happy. This documentary has given importance to the liking of Saba, a woman.

> I slowly regained consciousness and got out of the river... I came to a gas station and that's where I went for help (Chinoy, 2015, 07:49).

The above description of a situation when Saba acted as her own saviour shows the centralization of margin in the documentary. Saba is shown in this documentary as someone who herself acted as her own saviour without any male assistance. Saba was severely injured but she gathered courage to pull herself out of the river. She did not confine herself to the marginal space. She gathered courage and reclaimed her position in the society. First, she saved her freedom of choice by marrying the

person whom she wanted to marry by going against all the oppressive patriarchal structures. Then she saved her right to live by herself acting as her own saviour. Lyotard (1984) has defined postmodernism as something that embraces differences.

> People who visit my father tell me he is asking for forgiveness……
> My uncle begged me to forgive him. He pleaded with me. I told him to go away (Chinoy, 2015, 19:13).

The above dialogue shows the subversion of the narrative where men pressurize women in order to control the lives of women. But it is shown in the documentary that the men are pleading to a woman for forgiveness. This shows that how this documentary centers the margin. This documentary shows that women no longer stick to a position where they are completely dependent on men.

This documentary has also used several postmodern techniques that show that how the postmodern way of depicting a story differs from traditional ways of depicting a story.

Self-reflexivity is postmodern technique in which characters are engaged in direct conversation with the audience. The use of self-reflexivity can be seen at different points in the documentary. "Self-reflexive narrators especially appear in works of postmodern writers" (Knuth, 2005, p.1).

In *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015)* the characters are involved in direct address to the audience. The victims of acid attack narrate their stories by looking directly into the camera.

> He says he will not repeat this mistake. But I said I will not forgive him (Chinoy, 2015, 19:13).

The above dialogue was spoken by Saba by looking directly into the camera which shows the presence of postmodern technique self-reflexivity in the documentary.

Multiple perspectives is a prominent postmodern technique. It is a technique where story is described from numerous perspectives instead of getting presented from a

single perspective. There is an involvement of multiple perspectives in the documentary. Saba shares her perspective regarding her perpetrators who committed this honour killing attempt:

> I am going to fight this case (Chinoy, 2015,10:54).

Saba's mother shares her perspective regarding this honour killing attempt;

> This is what happens when honour is at stake (Chinoy, 2015,13:06).

The father of Saba expresses his perspective regarding this honour killing attempt:

> Whatever we did we were obliged to do it. She took away our honour (Chinoy_2015,14:10).

All these dialogues show that how this documentary has incorporated different perspectives.

Irony is a technique that is used in postmodernism. Irony shows the contrast between appearance and reality. This documentary has brought into light the actual image of oppressive patriarchy that contrasts with the appearance that the society wants to portray. And reality is that men abuse power in the name of honour. "Irony is non-literal usage of language, where what is said is contradicted by what is meant" (Nicol, 2009. p. 13).

> She took away our honor. I am an honorable man (Chinoy, 2015, 14:20).

The use of irony can be seen in the documentary on the occasion when Saba's father says that he attempted to kill his daughter because he is an honourable man. Here the use of the word honourable conveys an irony which shows that how in reality he is quite opposite to what he said. He is short tempered and egoist who is unable to see a woman going against the will of a man. Hence, it shows the presence of postmodern technique irony in the documentary.

This section deals with the analysis of the documentary *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015)* from the perspective of Dominance Feminism

given by Catharine A. MacKinnon (1987). Mackinnon (1987) has described that how gender is constructed by assigning men a dominant position and women a submissive position. Men being powerful use dominance and violence as a tool to confine women to the position that deprives them of power.

A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015) shows that how men try to assert their dominance over women through the use of violence. It is shown in the documentary that Saba has to face an honour killing attempt by her father and uncle just because she married by own choice by going against the choice of the men of her family. And this legal marriage of Saba was seen by patriarchy as something that brought shame to the family and as something that became the cause of dishonour for the men of Saba's family.

> Soon afterwards my uncle stopped the car and pulled me out. Then he started slapping and beating me (Chinoy,2015, 06:57).

The above scenario was described by Saba. This use of violence here is the representation of patriarchal mindset that makes men believe that they are entitled to use violence in order to control women. This use of violence and abuse by the Saba's uncle and father shows that how the difference between both the genders is maintained in the society by the use of abuse.

> Physicality for men has meant male dominance; it has meant force, coercion, and the ability to subdue and subject the natural world, one central part of which has been us (MacKinnon, 1987, p.121).

Mackinnon (1987) has shed light on the dark aspect of society where men try to assert their dominance by using coercion and by suppressing women.

> But I was just slightly able to tilt my face which led to the shot missing its target. Then they put me in bag and threw me in the river (Chinoy, 2015, 07:18).

The above dialogue is the illustration of a patriarchal mindset that tries to maintain the difference between both the genders by assigning a dominant position to the men. And by making men believe that they are allowed to use any form of violence against women if women try to challenge the dominance of men.

A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015) shows that how men consider themselves entitled to use violence and abuse in order to control women. This violence deprives women of their basic rights. Men use violence in order to push women to the position that makes them inferior to men. Saba's father and uncle represent a patriarchal mindset. They believed that they had the impunity to use violence in order to control Saba because they saw Saba's marriage of her own choice as a rebellion against the patriarchal society. Saba's uncle was in support of his brothers' attempt to kill his daughter. Saba's uncle expresses his patriarchal thoughts in the following way:

> What my brother did was absolutely right. I guess she survived……Whatever he did was absolutely right (Chinoy, 2015, 14:00).

The above dialogue of Saba's uncle shows that how patriarchal men consider the use of violence in order to control women as their inherent right. They do not feel any kind of shame or guilt after abusing women. Rather, they consider themselves as entitled to use violence as a tool to confine women to the marginal space. Women who try to challenge this patriarchal mindset and try to get liberty from male dominance are seen as rebel and men try to control them by using violence.

> So I said no, I will kill you myself. You are my daughter, I will kill you myself (Chinoy, 2015, 14:58).

This dialogue of Saba's father is a clear representation of patriarchal men who consider it their birthright to use violence against women. The way Saba's father says that he decided to kill Saba with his own hands just because she was his

daughter shows that how patriarchy makes men believe that all the women of their family are their possessions and not living beings with their own views and rights. Hence, this documentary brings into light the dark aspect of society where men consider themselves superior to women and they use violence as a tool to assert their authority and dominance over women and this tool is used by men in order to deprive women of their rights and to undermine the liberty of women by suppressing them.

The analysis of both documentaries *Saving Face (2012)* and *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* (2015) makes it explicit that both documentaries have shown disillusionment towards the grand and overarching narrative of patriarchy. Both these documentaries have embraced the sidelined narrative of women that usually does not get any attention in the world dominated by the narrative of patriarchy. Both these documentaries have served as platform for giving voice to women. *Saving Face (2012)* has brought into light the sufferings of women who are victims of acid attack. And *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015)* has brought into light the suffering of a woman who is the victim of honour killing attempt by the men of her family.

Both of these documentaries have incorporated several postmodern techniques such as self-reflexivity, irony, multiple perspectives and temporal distortion. The use of these techniques shows that how the postmodern way of presenting a story differs from traditional ways of presenting a story. Both these documentaries have also served as platform that has brought into light the dark aspect of abusive patriarchy where men use dominance and violence as a tool to control women.

7. Conclusion

This research has explored that how the Oscar winning Muslim documentaries *Saving Face (2012)* and *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015)* have

served as a platform for bringing into global spotlight the suffering of the oppressed who occupy the marginal space in the world. This research has also highlighted the postmodern techniques that are used in these documentaries in order to uncover that how postmodern way of presenting a story adopts unique techniques in order to present a story. This research has also explored that how these documentaries have brought into spotlight the dark reality of abusive patriarchy where men use dominance and violence as a tool to undermine women's autonomy.

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