



BLACKENING OF WOMEN'S FACES ON ADVERTISEMENT BOARDS

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Abstract

Women's faces on commercial billboards in Pakistan are always in danger of being blackened or defaced. Blotting of commercial billboards with images of female models is mostly associated with, so called, moral brigades, and the risk is increasing with each passing day in almost every big city of Pakistan. Although these incidents of vandalism were first highlighted around 2006 and 2007 during the 'islah (reform) campaign' by the Lal Masjid in Islamabad, yet the restriction on the female figures in media can be observed in 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, hoardings with female models have not been displayed in some of the regions, and some of the film posters were also blackened under the pressure of censor board in 1980s. This kind of blackening, of female images on advertisement boards, reveals that a specific segment of the society considers female images threatening for the value system of the society. This paper traces the act of blackening of female images on the advertising boards and its impact on the females in the society.

Keywords

Advertising, Billboards, Image, Islamisation, Women.



1. Introduction

Prevalence of gender-based violence can be observed within the class and belief system in the urban and rural areas in Pakistan. All kind of violence against women, including domestic and sexual violence to human trafficking, has its roots in a patriarchal social structures, which places women as subordinate or property of men (Aurat Foundation 2011). The idea, women: a

property of men, works as a base of all kinds of violence against women, discouraging them from the marriage of their choice, and preventing them from their right to vote to limit their role in the societal affairs. Family pressures, religious leaders and village committees are playing their part to exclude women from the electoral process (Repila 2013).

The act of blackening female images is also rooted in the same patriarchal mindset. However, it has deeper connotations, as it indicates that the vandals can't even tolerate the image of a woman.

Blackening of female images has a history in Pakistan. The researchers have witnessed crosshatching on the exposed body parts of female images on the film hoardings and posters, in 1980s and 1990s. The act of blackening was done under the directions of Censor Board of dictatorial regime of 1980's, as the print and electronic media was under strict scrutiny. President Zia's regime has supported certain religious groups to propagate the concept of *Jihad* and supplied warriors for the Soviet-Afghan war, in 1979 (J. Khan 2015). In return, these religious groups could influence the rules and regulations of the state. Most of the laws were made against the basic rights of women, and females in mass media and advertising were propagated as symbol or source of vulgarity (Saleem 2006). This discrimination is noticed by Ogilvy; one of the most influential advertising tycoons, he mentions it as an example and suggests not to use female images on advertising boards in Pakistan, in 1980s, because the display of female images is declared as an act of disobeying God (Ogilvy 1985, 26). Recently, advertising agency Ogilvy Jeddah has used same sort of blackening with the use of marker as design element in a lingerie and swimwear brand, for Saudi Arabia, which is regarded as 'to

transform censorship into art' (fig.5) (Edward 2013).

Blackening in 2006-07 are slightly different from the 1980s, as lately not only bodies but the faces of the female models were also blackened. The act of blackening faces was reported as part of '*islah* (reform) campaign' demonstrated by the *Lal Masjid*. The religious activists of *Lal Masjid*, mostly females, had damaged the hoardings by blackening the faces of female models, and also wrote messages, such as; "*fahashi, bayhayi band karo*" (stop vulgarity, immorality) (K. Ali 2015). These slogans along with blackening of females' images on advertisement boards indicate the mindset of a specific religious segment of the society depicting the increasing intolerance towards presence of women at large. A *madrassa* student, who was not part of the act of vandalism, believed that the "bare faces" should not be allowed on hoardings because these could stimulate many sinful acts; and his religious tutor hated the female models, even before the exhibitors or the owners (K. Ali 2014).

The exploitation of religion to fulfill political agendas is part and parcel of Pakistani power politics. Religion is misused, time and again, to divert the attention from the core issues to non-issues; such as, women dress code, women right to marriage, women's photography, which resulted in limiting their presence in different walks of life and to restrict the freedom of expression. It is a fact that religion has been used to form the political ideology of the country, and later dogmatic persuasion of religion has been

transforming the society from secular to religious state; however, religious groups have never been able to form any government directly until the catastrophe of September 11, 2001, which brought war to Afghanistan. The major political parties had rejected the idea of being partner of US; as a result the religious groups had played a part in, so called, War on Terror (WoT) (Riffat 2015). The partnership with US had given an opportunity to the specific religious groups to form their government in North West Province¹ for the first time in 2002 (J. Khan 2015; F. Shaikh 2009). Thus, the first instance of official banning of women's photography, in any area of Pakistan, was in 2003.

Mutahida Majlis e Amal (MMA), the joint venture of all religious groups, after forming the government, had raised *Shariat* bill in the assembly to suppress women rights by implementing *purdha* for all women from the age of 11 onwards, restricting women images on billboards, declaring family planning policy unlawful, and by restraining male doctors, or sports persons, or tailors to provide any services to females (Saleem 2006). The cinema houses and display centers were demolished, female sports were banned, and billboards with females' images were destroyed, which was considered to be big step towards 'Talibanisation' of the province (Shehzad 2005). Indeed, MMA administration tried to impose a specific version

of Islam which placed modernity as an opposite to religion. According to their leaders the female imagery is definitely "a conspiracy by the West to weaken Pakistan by promoting a liberal lifestyle" (K. Ali 2014). It is substantial to note that the reforms of MMA are mostly linked with the policies of 1980s, which were to use religion to shift the attention from the core socio-political and economic issues, towards the non-issue of female role in society.

Ideological basis of the specific version of religion had instigated a fanatic hatred for images, and thus for art and culture. Prohibition of imagery amalgamated with 'Saudization' has influenced amateur minds at enormous level, and middle classes had lost every expression of happiness; for example, the traditional festival of *Basant* (Kite flying), classical music and traditional *kathak* dancing (Hoodbhoy 2017). Indeed, after 2002, the social, political and religious issues have been multiplied, and the society has been dividing into liberal and conservative segments. Bilal and Bilal (2018) discusses this divide in society, and traces its roots further in the increasing influence of Saudi culture, which regards overpowering sexuality of women as a threat to Muslim-hood. Apart from the divide, the act of vandalism also identifies the status of the women in the society. Women have been facing harassment in routine consisting vulgar disgrace in form of abusive shouting, blowing and sexualized gaze, as if the woman is a totally under controlled sex object. One of its initial form is 'gaze' or 'sexualized staring',

¹ North-West Frontier Province, the name was changed to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by the 18th Amendment to Pakistan's Constitution in 2010

where woman is an Image, and man as an owner of the look (Mulvey 1975). In South-Asian culture, man is not only an owner of the look, but a possessor of the woman's fate. South-Asian females are treated as a property of male, as indicated by the famous proverb *zan, zar, zameen* (woman, wealth and land). It signifies, woman is equivalent to an object; wealth and land, whilst having no feelings or independent self.

Pakistan is categorized as third most dangerous place for women, in the global survey, on the basis of ethnic, tribal and religious practices, which cause dowry murder, honour killings, acid attacks, forced marriages and punishment by stoning (Anderson 2011). Almost one thousand cases of honour killing are reported every year and this rate is increasing. Judiciary, mostly consist of males, seems to give the benefit of the doubt to the male, even in the murder, or rape cases, as immoral sexual act by a female is acceptable, to the community and the justice system, as an adequate cause for murder (R. Ali 2001). The study also reveals that biased rules and regulations certified in the name of religion, in the 1980s, are the biggest hurdle to reinstate the basic rights of women (Aurat Foundation 2011). "In addition, women who do attempt to religious path, are more vulnerable than any other working lady. They are judged as a threat to morality, for example, Qandeel Baloch, a 26-year-old social media star who gained popularity due to her sexually bold videos, was murdered by her brother for honour. She had a strong fan following; however, her assassination was not

speak out or take on public roles that challenge ingrained gender stereotypes of what's acceptable for women to do or not, such as working as policewomen or news broadcasters, are often intimidated or killed" (Anderson 2011). Indeed, the space for females are reducing and the prevailing issues are being further complicated particularly after 2002.

In reaction to 'Talibanisation' and female exploitation Malala Yousafzai has raised her voice for the right of young girls to receive education; however, her ambition was considered as a conspiracy by the right-wing groups (World news 2013). Malala's struggle is an exact contrast to Taliban's fundamental ideology; however, she, despite being seen socialism as a solution to all exploitation indicates in her speech, on the occasion of Noble Peace Prize 2014, that women's lives can be improved within the religious atmosphere (Schwartz 2014). Indeed, most of the society consider religion is the only path to solvation, so the terms like "Islamic Socialism", "Islamic Banking", "Islamic law or *Sharia law*", and "*Riasat e Madian*" were coined repeatedly.

Female models or media celebrities, as considered to be deviated from the specific sympathized by the masses. The fundamentalists have cursed her for not following the prescribed religious path and categorized her as a traitor polluting Pakistan's Islamic culture to accomplish Indian agenda. Instantaneously, the moderate elite has also rejected her as a feminist, and labeled her work as "illiterate exhibitionism"

(Mirza 2016). Qandeel's selfies and videos with a religious cleric had placed her in a danger zone, considering the historical path of socio-political exploitation of religion. Indeed, for Pakistani society women's body is a battle field to prove all its ethical and moral values. Her murder has further revealed the complexities involved in the formation of biases of Pakistani society where even the liberals and moderates didn't raise their voice against this brutality.

Female body is the only space to display, so called, moral values of the society, could also be further witnessed on the damaged hoarding of TUC biscuits, a multinational snack company (fig. 1)². Mahira Khan, a Pakistani star, became victim of mass trolling after the unofficial release of her photographs during a casual timeout with Ranbir Kapoor, an Indian star. These photos went viral, and the female star was accused of ruining her 'sober' image, due to her 'inappropriate' dressing and a cigarette in her hand. Initially, the reaction reflects on social media where people declared her cheap and immoral due to her dressing, and even questioned her religious beliefs (S. Shaikh 2017). She was also declared 'non-Muslim' by a few bashers on social media (I. Khan 2017). In contrast to Qandeel, a girl with a lower middleclass background, Mahira secured some support by her fans and co-stars. The celebrities like Usman Khalid Butt and Ali Zafar criticized the double

standards of the society in response to the incident (I. Khan 2017).

Researchers, considering the fate of Qandeel, have been expecting Mahira Khan to face some strong reaction. A patriarchal society, as owner the female body and will, has shown its aggression on the outdoor campaign, in 2017, starring Khan. The vandals, within less than a week's time, torn off the hoardings. Researchers has witnessed one of the tattered hoardings, at a busy crossing in the city of Lahore, with some part of the face of the 'alleged' model was undamaged to be recognized by public properly. They gave loud and clear message to women, making more than half of Pakistani population, about the consequence of wearing dress of their own choice. The action against the female images on the hoardings has a symbolic value, as it's an act of eliminating the females from the society.

Impact on Advertising: In 1980s, a strong censorship code, about the depiction of woman in print and electronic media, had both negative and positive aspects. The negative part was the banning of television commercials without a solid reason, for example: Censor Board had raised objection on an ad of a camera, where an actor closed one of his eyes, considered as winking, while taking a photograph; and another TVC was considered 'sexually provocative', as a boy licking his 'milk moustache'. However, the positive part was the creative aspect, as, in specific limitations, one had to find innovative ways to depict a women in a TVC, for example:

² The image was captured by Aysha Bilal

“Be happy have a biscuit”, shown a happy and smiling face of woman with “Happy” biscuits; or in a TVC of “Tuk” a woman’s hand hitting to the beat of ‘tuk tuk’ (Aurora 2018). Indeed, a strong control had damaged the advertising industry as most of the advertisers had only made simply descriptive TVCs with direct show of product features, as it was hard to get approval of the Censor Board.

As a result of blackening of faces in 2006-07, some of the clothing brands have stopped using female models on their advertisements (Fig. 2). In 2012, two of the labels in Karachi have to remove images of Bollywood actresses from their adverts, as their advertising boards were covered with a slogan: 'sell your clothes, not your honour' (Fig. 3) (Robson 2013). As a result, J. Lawn, Almirah Lawn and Al Karam textiles preferred to use mannequins and the logo, instead of female models (Fig. 4). These brands and their managers, with a religious background, believed that the advertising should be aligned to the basic teachings of the religion. On the other hand, the liberal had an issue with the objectification of women in the adverts (Robson 2013). Both, fundamentalists and liberals, are not considering the impact of the faceless or bodiless advertisements on their major customers, which are again women.

Pakistani society, apart from all the religious provocation, have been inspired from some of the global movements highlighting the issues of violence and harassment against women, recently.

Most prominent campaigns, on social media, are “#Beat me” by UN women Pakistan and “Me too” international movement. These movements and campaigns involved popular women from many spheres of life hence created deep impact on Pakistani advertising. “#Beat Me” challenges their counterparts to beat them at their respective expertise (Elsa 2016). Every other advertisement of products ranging from edibles to clothing brands has engaged the concept of gender equality and women empowerment in its content, imagery and text. Gul Ahmad *Mein Perfect Hoon* (I am Perfect) TVC challenges the stereotypes associated with ‘perfect beauty’ and encourages young women to embrace their uniqueness along with their flaws. Voiceover and strong imagery build the narrative about self-confidence of girls on their curly hair, moles, slanted nose, unusual dress sense and dark complexion. Young women are shown as if they are challenging the world around them, they are looking directly into the camera whilst confronting all odds with poise in their imperfect-perfection.

In contrast, a lineup of ads by Junaid Jamshed; one the leading apparel brands in Pakistan, has averted the whole wave. J dot has been using ‘headless’ mannequins wearing lawn prints, in almost every BTL campaign since its launch in 2007, which indicates the influence of a specific religious mindset: A conscious effort to avoid the image of a ‘real’ woman. However, over slight observation of these hoardings it can easily be figured out that the real women have been used for modeling and they are colored and converted

into headless mannequins in post-production. A mannequin is devoid of life, having no expression: happiness or sadness or anxiousness, at all. It is only invisible, unidentified and silent, as an ideal woman of Junaid Jamshed should be. However, J. believes in showing the sensual body parts of women to attract its clients.

This selective approach of women representation is further endorsed in its 2019 winter TVC that has the quality to flabbergast the viewer. This ad starts with a narration about colors of winter in female voice and then series of shots of headless women, only to cater to the 'male gaze', start upsetting the viewer and causes extreme disturbance till the end. The TVC is shot in an artificially closed and controlled environment with flat colored; mostly pink, walls. Presence of both men and women is shown in the video where headless women are doing some activities such as drinking coffee, handing over book to a man, coming out of a room leaving a man behind, meeting female friend, sitting on the floor and leaning with a wall beside burning fireplace. Whereas men with their 'heads' are sitting on sofa or leaning with wall having authoritative attitude and expressions. The TVC is a strong example of gender bias exists in the society, as it suggests that a woman, in this country, is an object whose individual identity, feelings and views do not matter (Niazi 2019). Indeed, the mid shots of women wearing prints of J dot focus on their breasts, waists and hips and shots of men with their heads and eyes

looking at women bodies create imbalance and unrest in the whole situation.

Cropping of the frame of women shots echo to the portrait of "Dahomey Woman" by Irving Penn in 1967. This portrait is explained by Liz Wells as "her headless body is totally objectified and dehumanized and is presented for the consumption to the predominantly white viewer-she cannot even look back" (Wells 2000). The act of dehumanization of woman and her representation as body parts for objectification rather a complete character can clearly be felt throughout the J. ad. "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger 1972). In the very ad women interactions with men are reflection of the relation of looker and the object to be looked at where she can't even 'watch being looked at'. In the previous ads the advertiser has opted not to show women faces but to display the faces of kids and men only in various settings to avoid so-called *haram* act. However, the ad under discussion presents women through the masculine point of view where women are inferior sex objects. It also leads to the curiosity to see the 'unidentifiable' headless women's bodies again and again as if these bodies are inviting gazes to look upon them.

2. Conclusion

This research paper analyzes complexities and prejudices involved with the visual representation of women in Pakistani society. The extreme religious and political ideologies are

too inflexible to give space to the actual or imaginary presence of women at any progressive platforms. Thus, a female is threatened whether it is a workplace, or a co-education institute, or a market, or at a street, or at a billboard. It also reveals that a segment of Pakistani moderate forces, under the pressure of religious groups, is also trying to draw their ideology from religion, and want their females to be given education under religious environment. Another secular segment is looking at local feminism as amateurish showing-off. Society is fragmenting and not even a single segment is having a clear stance on the female representation.

The advertisers and brands tried to bypass the censorship in the 1980s. In later years, some of the brands chose to follow the self-censorship and avoid female image; however, in the quest for grabbing the attention of their segment of the market, the religious mindset of J. reaches to a worst form of objectification. Thus, Niazi (2019) declares that Junaid Jamshed's TVC is "too sexist to digest", and a woman must not enter even in the shop of the brand. If the practice of blackening images, or eliminating female characters from advertising, under the pressure of specific religious mindset, remain unnoticed by authorities, they society will completely lose its softness and delight. A faceless mannequin is the only acceptable visual to the religious mindset. In contrast, most of the advertising boards are showing happy females with smiling faces challenging the acceptable ideology; thus, these

happy females or the images of females are always in danger.

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