Soap operas and telenovelas are watched by millions of people around the world every day. As cultural, social, and economic phenomena, examining them will further our understanding of the role of global media content in the digital age. Moreover, as these programs continue to be exported and transformed at regional levels, and through digitalization, it is more important than ever to analyze where the genre has been, where it is now, and where it is going.

This collection brings together original scholarship from an international and trans-disciplinary perspective. Chapters address timely issues, theories, and debates that are inextricably linked to soap operas and telenovelas as global industries, as sites for new audiences, and as hybrid cultural products within the digital landscape. Bringing depth and originality to the subject area, each chapter demonstrates the richness of these genres and their long-term significance as the televisual landscape evolves and becomes increasingly reliant on technological and creative innovations.

"This book adds a much-needed analysis of the development of telenovelas in the digital age. With articles both providing a historical background and covering the main trends and production hubs around the world, this will be essential reading to those interested in better understanding one of the most popular and enduring genres in the global media landscape." —*Antonio C. La Pastina, Texas A&M University*

"*Soap Operas and Telenovelas in the Digital Age* brings together a range of international scholars who tease out the complexities of these two television genres that are generally misunderstood, undervalued, and understudied. The book provides both breadth and depth, and is a welcome contribution to the growing body of telenovela and soap opera scholarship." —*Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Georgia*

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20

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PETER LANG

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Global Industries and New Audiences

EDITED BY DIANA I. RIOS & MARI CASTAÑEDA

Toby Miller
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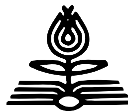

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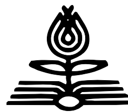

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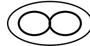

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14. "Trashy Tastes" and Permeable Borders

Indian Soap Operas on Afghan Television

Wazhmah Osman

It has been described as "addictive like Opium" and "uncontrollable like Satan" by prominent Islamists in Afghanistan. Television, more specifically the tele-visual representations of women (both foreign and Afghan) on Afghan television stations, have instigated a series of escalating gender battles between "Islamists," "moderates," and others. Religious militants have called for severe punishments for women and men engaged in what they deem anti-Islamic media productions and programming. Outraged mullahs (religious clerics) have also successfully petitioned the government to ban some of the "provocative" television serials and films. The broadcasting of these television programs has inspired a series of riots and protests from opposing sides. Additionally, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters *sans frontieres* have been documenting a rise in acts of violence perpetuated against female news anchors, singers, and actors in Afghanistan.

Gender has always been a contentious issue in Afghanistan. However, in light of recent events, gender has become a particularly volatile matter. Since 9/11 and the start of the "War on Terror," Afghan women have been put under the Western spotlight in popular culture, evident in the proliferation of media such as fiction films, television programs, documentaries, books, and news that focus on their plight under repressive Islamic regimes. These media have been critiqued by scholars from a variety of disciplines concerned with

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 238

the overwhelming portrayal of women as victims, without accounting for their actual or potential agency, thereby perpetuating stereotypes of women under Islam that have gained new currency since 9/11 (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002). The powerful visual imagery that is the offspring of this prolific body of work and which originates from Afghanistan but is produced in Western institutions, ricochets globally between America and Europe, and other nations, circulating widely through genres as diverse as law, popular culture, and high art. Likewise, Afghan institutions are forced to "talk back" to the global circulation of images of Afghan women. Yet while issues pertaining to "Afghan Women" have been reverberating globally on an unprecedented volume and scale, little attention has been given to the cultural productions that constitute gender subjectivities in the daily lives of Afghans.

This chapter explores how and why Indian telenovelas have become one of the critical factors in the current Afghan cultures wars with their contesting claims of Afghan identity and conversely why Iranian soap operas have not been as popular or contentious. It also includes an analysis of television's catalytic role and function in fueling public discourses around gender issues by grappling with the following question: Why is the tele-presence of women as compared to their circulation in other media particularly problematic to the Afghan religious sector?

The research for this chapter was gathered in the summers of 2004 and 2008 and during the 2009–2010 academic year. My methods are largely media ethnographic (Abu-Lughod, 2004; Mankekar, 1999; Rajagopal, 2001). Although the majority of the television viewers I interviewed are from Kabuli households, I have also included data from other major cities such as Jalalabad, Pul-i-Alam, Bamiyan, Andkhoy, Asadabad, and Panjshir. Outside of the cities, television viewing is sporadic and dependent on whether electricity has reached the smaller towns and villages and/or the inhabitants can afford generators. For this reason, although most households have a television set, radio tends to dominate in rural areas.

The Kabuli television viewers in this study represent a cross-section of the society from a wide range of neighborhoods. To the north of the Kabul River are the wealthy neighborhoods of *Wazir Akbar Khan* and *Shar-i-Now* that cater predominantly to wealthy international consultants and the old elites of Kabul. The north also includes the nouveau riche neighborhoods of *Khair Khana*, *Shirpoor*, and *Quallah Fatullah* as well as the middle class neighborhoods of *Karteh Say*, *Macroyan*, and *Karteh Char*. On the south side of the Kabul River are the lower income neighborhoods that encompass the "Old City." In addition to these recognized and demarcated neighborhoods, the

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 239

chapter also includes data from households located in the ever-rising slums of Kabul. Officially known as "informal settlements," these houses are built higher and higher into the surrounding mountains of the city. The inhabitants of the "informal settlements" who currently do not pay taxes and do not own deeds to their homes are slowly coming under the purview of the government via new initiatives that aim to grant property rights and official recognition to them.

After nearly a decade of the Taliban's strict ban on all media except their own Sharia radio and despite a precarious political situation, Afghanistan is experiencing a surge in new media outlets with over two dozen new television stations, hundreds of publications, and a fledging film industry. A new configuration of resources from a combination of foreign, domestic, private, and public sources has enabled this unprecedented proliferation of media. In Afghanistan, the medium at the heart of the most public and most politically charged debates surrounding gender is broadcast television. Both the state-run broadcasting organization, Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) and the growing number of private television stations such as Tolo (Sunrise), Emrose (Today), Noor (Light), Farda (Tomorrow) are facing government bans, charges, and/or fines based on Article 3 of the Post 9/11 constitution, which prohibits anything that is deemed to be "contrary to the sacred religion of Islam." The Ministry of Information and Culture, among other governmental and non-governmental bodies, enforces this section of the constitution and ensures that television stations abide to the government's dictates.

Love Them or Hate Them: The Alternate Lives of Soap Operas

Although the religious right has targeted many different genres of television programs, from Afghan versions of Western reality shows such as *Pop Idol* and *Top Model* to music video call-in shows, as well as the news, it is the dramatic Indian serials that have consistently born the brunt of their charges. With varying degrees of success, the parliament has passed several bills in an attempt to ban Indian soap operas from Afghan television. These Indian serials resemble Latin American telenovelas and American soap operas in their melodramatic performances and domestic content, and have also over time adopted the lavish sets and costumes stylistically associated with Bollywood films (Das, 1995). However, unlike Western dramatic serials and similar to Latin American telenovelas, they are not open ended in form, and often last between one to two years.

As a result of the historical dominance of Bollywood in the region as well as a new configuration of dynamics, it is no secret that the vast majority of Afghans love Indian films and Indian dramatic serials. Although the Indian soaps are inching forward in popularity, this does not diminish the fact that Afghans are also avid consumers of the news. Afghan filmmakers who associate aesthetically with the Iranian avant garde often complain about the "low-brow" and "trashy" tastes of their fellow country people who flock to see the latest Bollywood blockbuster but do not possess the "sophistication" and "cultivation" to appreciate high art films, Iranian cosmopolitan films, global independent films, and documentary films. People from abroad, both the returning Afghan expatriate community and Westerners working for international organizations, echo a similar distaste. A young female expatriate from France who works for the United Nations expressed a lack of comprehension and ridicule for her middle-aged Afghan driver's love of Indian soap operas. She told me in an interview: "Oh I know about those Indian programs. All I hear is *Tulsi*, *Tulsi*, *Tulsi*. Around a certain time my driver comes in to my office to make sure that we're leaving on time. If I have to stay later at work he asks to leave for an hour to go watch *Tulsi*. God forbid, we were running late a few times and he was driving like a maniac and nearly killed us."

The categorization of Indian serials as a lower art form is symptomatic of the development of soap operas and television more generally in the West. As feminist and television scholars have shown, from their onset both the medium of television and the genre of soap operas were gendered as feminine (Corner, 1999; Murray, 2005; Newcomb, 2006; Spigel, 1992). In Post-World War II United States, television executives and commercial advertisers deployed daytime soap operas as a means of interpellating a new suburban American family by targeting housewives. As the name suggests, soap companies along with other industries aimed at constructing proper notions of womanhood via the new technology of television, sponsored and created soap operas with the broader goals of selling soap, kitchen appliances, and other modern household products.

Additionally, during this time, the credit industry surfaced to enable most Americans to buy television sets they could not otherwise afford. As opposed to theater or concert performances, which were available only to the elites of society, television began to reach the masses, and thus became known as "the Poor Man's Theater" (Boddy, 1992). The combination of being gendered as feminine along with its low-class status is what led to an overall devaluing of both the genre and the medium in the West. In fact, in her famous study of the popular primetime television soap opera *Dallas*, Ang (1985), discovered

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 241

that most of fans she interviewed, recognizing the lowly status of the genre, made excuses about why they enjoyed watching the program.

However, this is not the case in Afghanistan. When the state broadcasting company first started broadcasting the television signal in 1974, most households could not afford television sets. Owning a television set and watching television was elusive, a sought after activity that was a sign of high status and wealth. Growing up as part of a middle-class Afghan family, we did not own a television set and would gather with the rest of the extended family at my grandparents' house to watch the nightly programs. Even though the conditions for television ownership are not quite as strenuous today, it is still difficult for the average Afghan family not employed by foreign organizations to acquire a television set and therefore it continues to be a status symbol. Additionally, the soap operas are aired in the evenings at 7:00 PM and 9:00 PM and target entire households. This is the prime time for broadcasting for somewhat different reasons than in the West. Due to the precarious present day situation in Afghanistan, in the evenings the majority of people stay indoors and consume media at home. Women, generally, do not go to the movie theaters or watch television in public places. The evenings are also the time when electricity is most consistent.

Since there is no history of stigmatization, the storylines and subject matters of the Indian serials, though still pertaining to domestic issues, are considered worthy entertainment to be enjoyed by both men and women. The fan base of these serials cuts across societal lines and includes police officers, politicians, and even prominent warlords. A number of high ranking warlords and/or politicians are even known to cut short their evening prayers in order to not miss the start of their favorite soap operas. Dramatic epic stories of mythic and historic proportions often involving unrequited love between tragic heroes and heroines have a long history in the literary and poetic spheres as well as traditions of orality of Afghan society. So, in contrast to their Western counterparts, for the indigenous Afghan population, viewing television soap operas and/or dramatic serials is a valued and cherished past time.

Far from Mere Entertainment: Will Television Save or Destroy Afghanistan?

The popularity of such television programs and television's own intrinsic qualities are recognized by elites interested in Afghanistan. From television executives to government officials, religious leaders, international governmental and

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 242

non-governmental consultants and advisers, a considerable amount of hopes and fears are being funneled into the medium. They are well aware of television's power, especially in a country like Afghanistan, and have come to the same conclusions about the medium's inherent potential as media scholars.

In developmentalist circles and political science terminology, Afghanistan is frequently described as a "failed," "broken," "fragmented," or "collapsed" nation (Rubin, 2002; Ghani & Lockhart, 2008). Having replaced the earlier classifications of "late state formation," "the rentier state," and "third world despotism," (Rubin, 2002) such terms continue the pervasive rhetoric of "failure" in Western discourse and thereby glosses over progressive historical achievements of nations like Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2006; Mitchell, 1991, 2002). Yet at the same time it cannot be denied that currently, Afghanistan, having experienced thirty years of guerilla warfare and international militarization, has lost its previous state, civil, and governmental infrastructural capacities. Decades of ethnic, religious, and gender violence have left an almost indelible mark of disunity, and fractured any sense of a cohesive society. Therefore, the language of "failure" can be useful, keeping its problematic colonial and neo-colonial epistemological roots and agendas in mind, but only as a starting point to understanding the complexity of contemporary Afghan social worlds.

In order to fix the broken, collapsed, and failed nation that is Afghanistan, or to use the official language, "nation building" or "reconstruction" can only happen via a mass venue for healing and purging, remembering and forgetting. For that, there is no better or worse medium than television.

The technology's electro-visual mass appeal, sensory integration, simultaneity of exposure, and broadcasting potential which imbue it with a false sense of communal live-ness has always made television a source of social power, and cultural imaginings, both dystopic and utopic. In a country where the vast majority of people are illiterate and access to computers and the internet is limited, television becomes an even more powerful medium. As television scholars have theorized, television has the eerie ability of conjuring face to face community gatherings but with the power of reaching large scale audiences (McLuhan, 1962; Ong, 1982; Williams, 2003; Parks, 2005). It is no wonder then that the hopes and fears of many people are riding on the future of television in Afghanistan.

Feminist, cultural studies, and television scholars particularly from the Birmingham Centre have also located television, due to its mass appeal, as a site of cultural contestation (Hall, 1997; Morley, 1992). In light of television's technological aspects and Afghanistan's current social climate, the heated and

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 243

volatile nature of debates surrounding television and television programming is not surprising. When a television station abruptly stopped airing a popular Indian soap opera, *Kum Kum*, in the Spring of 2008, most likely due to pressure from the government, the resulting uproar and clamor could be heard both in online forums and on the streets as fans demanded answers. The show's diasporic fanbase (who watch Indian soap operas on satellite television) used the Internet to voice their anger while the Afghan community held protests outside of the Ariana Television Network (ATN) headquarters in Kabul to demand answers. Religious groups have also begun broadcasting television programs aimed at teaching the tenets of Islam although further analysis into their popularity and viewership is needed.

Therefore, in an increasingly competitive television mediascape, one way to ensure a share of the audience market and therefore advertising revenue is through airing Indian dramatic serials. For owners of private television stations, it is a matter of understanding the consumption patterns and tastes of their fellow country people and then delivering programming that appeals to those tastes. For instance, in order to compete with two of the most popular television stations, Tolo TV and Ariana Television Network (ATN), Emrose TV, a new entrant on the scene, which launched in 2008, took the bold risk of showing Indian telenovelas unedited. The manager of the station was subsequently arrested and served two months in prison. After several years of intense fighting with religious authorities, Tolo TV and ATN, launched in 2004 and 2005 respectively, began self-censoring the content of their Indian soap operas by a combination of blurring, fading, and re-editing any "inappropriately" exposed parts of women's bodies and also Hindu religious idols.

It is important to note, however, that the battles over censoring women's bodies are only in the context of terrestrial television. Pornography and pornographic imagery is readily available and accessible on satellite television, which reach approximately fifty percent of households in Kabul. In addition, such content is also downloadable on cell phones even in remote provinces, and available for sale in the form of cheap video disks (DVDs) behind the counter in every media kiosk in all shopping bazaars. This is most likely due to the fact that the owners of terrestrial television stations, constrained by technology, are obliged to heed government supervision in order to maintain or secure a limited frequency wave.

Although little research has been done to study the circulation and technologies of video disks and cell phone videos in informal markets, media ethnographers have begun to explore how satellite television is rapidly transforming the mediascape in Gulf countries from Syria to Iraq. They have

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 244

demonstrated how the continual attempts by religious authorities in Arab countries to block some programming and commission others confirm that television drama is far from mere entertainment (Abu-Lughod, 2004; Salamandra, 2004).

In early May of 2008, the Afghan government issued a decree to ban the televising of Indian serials. Many television stations complied, but Tolo TV and ATN refused on the grounds that the vague media laws do not give the government the power to ban entire programs, but only small portions, which can be altered or removed. Media owners are currently challenging the legality of government censorship and in the process, defining the media laws in the Afghan courts. In the case of broadcast television, the fight is being lead by Tolo TV. Thus, what seems like an act of acquiescing to the religious censors, on the part of Tolo and ATN, for re-editing Indian serials, is in fact an act of defiance.

Cultural Imperialism or National Fascism?

One of the main grievances of the religious groups against the Indian soap operas is that they are "Hinduizing" Afghan culture and therefore tainting what is imagined as a pure Islamic Afghan culture. Since the Indian dramatic serials address issues such as adultery, divorce, and other domestic issues, the faith-based groups have also charged the programs with "immorality." They have voiced fears that Afghan women and youth are particularly susceptible to emulating the "improper" lifestyles and customs of South Asians.

This type of criticism assumes that certain types of audiences do not possess the media savvy and intelligence to have more complicated readings, and therefore are easily duped and swayed. This harkens back to early communication theory, coming from the Frankfurt School and World War I propaganda studies (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1969) and their American colleagues (Lasswell, 1927; Lippmann, 1993; McLuhan, 1962). These studies imagined the media as a weapon in the arsenal of Fascism; controlling and conforming people's thoughts, behaviors, and actions to the wishes and suggestions of media producers and/or societal elites. This simplistic model of an all powerful media injecting a passive population with messages has long been replaced by reception and audience research which have shown that audiences can ward off, appropriate, and/or reinterpret media messages (Ang, 1985; Fiske, 1988; Hall, 1997; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2005; Morley, 1992).

Additionally, by projecting a pure homogenous culture, this type of crit-

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 245

icism does not take into account Afghanistan's complex media history and shifting consumption and production patterns. From its formative days, Afghanistan's media landscape has been in the spheres of influence of its powerful neighbors' Iran, India, and to a lesser extent Soviet/Russian media and dominated by their exported cultural products. This was a result of both geographic proximity and cultural affinity. Early Afghan filmmakers, musicians, and other media makers were often trained abroad in one of these neighboring countries. Additionally, Iranians and Afghans share dialects, Farsi and Dari respectively, of the same language of Persian; although Pashto is also an official language of Afghanistan.

During the Soviet Occupation, many Afghans sought refuge in Pakistan due to Iran's relatively restrictive immigration policies. According to most statistics, the numbers were two to one with approximately three million Afghans escaping to Pakistan and one and a half million Afghans taking refuge in Iran. During their decade long exile, a relatively large part of the Afghan population became fluent in either Urdu and/or Hindi. In fact, most Afghans can understand the imported Indian dramatic serials without the common overdubbing in Dari. As a result of the immigration patterns in which more than half of the Afghan population was exiled during the war, the popularity of Indian media is at an all time high while Iranian media is waning.

This brief history illustrates the fact that Indian cultural traces have been a part of Afghan culture for a long time. With the ever expanding reach of new technologies, globalization theory reminds us that cultures are never insular, impermeable, and static but always in flux and transforming (Appadurai, 1996; Ginsburg et al, 2002). Just as media technologies cross borders, so do technologies of violence. Despite its reputation as a hostile and impenetrable country, acquired thanks to British and Russian-Soviet colonial mythologies, and also due to its harsh and mountainous geography, Afghanistan is no more impervious to cultural influences than any other country. Yet, this is not to say that the broader charges of cultural imperialism are not legitimate. As a result of the destruction of its cultural institutions such as its media, education, and museums, culturally speaking, presently, Afghanistan is particularly unsedimented and unsettled.

Therefore, questions of cultural vulnerability and cultural imperialism take on a new urgency in a place and space where the possibilities of redefining national identity are wide open. The common concern amongst media activists and cultural critics is that distinctive heterogeneous cultures are being erased, tainted, and/or diffused by the homogenizing force of Western capital expansion and media globalization. If we look at concrete economic fac-

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 246

tors and worldwide media ownership trends, it is clear that a handful of Western corporations dominate the film, music, and television industries (Bagdikian, 2000; McChesney, 2004; Schiller, 1976, 1991). These very real structural imbalances enable wealthy Western nations to aggressively produce, distribute, and market media products with alluringly high production quality. Therefore, flows of media products are disproportionately one way, from wealthy Western countries to developing or third world nations. In this respect, although the consumption of media products might be global, the production and distribution and therefore financial benefits are skewed in the direction of the West. Such capitalistic strategies, techniques, and ventures coupled with the exploitative history of colonialism and imperialism of the West have left many former colonies out of the global picture—both literally and metaphorically. The usual suspect and target of the media imperialism argument is American media products with their Americanizing effects. Yet in the case of Afghanistan, is there real cause to worry about Indianization of media and culture more broadly?

New media scholarship is revealing that the tides of change are dissociating "global media" from American media, and new global players are emerging from non-Western countries. Indian media exports are finding avid consumers all over the world (Ganti, 2004; Larkin, 2008). Even the effectiveness of Western formats, supposedly void of any cultural specificities, crossing borders are being challenged, as in the failed case of the British melodrama *Crossroads* in Kazakhstan (Mandel, 2002). A not so new media behemoth is vying for the coveted position of becoming the new "global media."

Although the Islamists use the rhetoric of cultural imperialism in order to incite fears of cultural homogenization, their arguments are actually grounded in the promotion and imposition of a strict version of Islam. This is a direct attempt at erasing Afghanistan's diverse cultural history and varied experiences with Islam. The type of Islam that they are preaching is a specific orthodox brand of Islam that, although around for over one century in Afghanistan, has only recently re-emerged and re-energized. A new configuration of external forces resulting from Cold War politics has re-animated internal religious fringe groups and fanatical sects into powerful movements, but whether they actually enjoy popular support is currently up for debate on television and other media.

Here it is important to stress that the vast majority of Afghans self identify as Muslim and so do the fans of Indian soap operas interviewed for this study, but practices and ideologies vary accordingly. Likewise, distinctions have

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 247

been made between practices of Islam in everyday contexts and Islamism as a legal and political framework (Asad, 1993, 2003; Göle & Ammann, 2006; Mahmood, 2005). Therefore, despite their invocation of cultural imperialism, the religious authorities in Afghanistan, with their authoritarian decrees against the media or women's rights, often target not only Hinduism, but challenge plurality and the multiplicity of voices within Islam. In fact, a number of the Indian serials to which the religious authorities have objected actually represent Indian or Pakistani Muslims.

However, the Islamist diversion does not diminish the question: Is the powerhouse next door overshadowing and impeding the development of an indigenous Afghan aesthetic and artistic style and culture?

The fact is that it is less costly for Afghan television stations to buy Indian and Iranian dramatic serials than produce their own programs. While making Afghan versions of reality format shows is within their means, to produce high quality dramatic serials is outside the scope of these recently established media outlets. In other words, they cannot compete with the established media industries of India and Iran that have the wealth to invest in expensive productions and the extensive production experience.

After almost three decades of war and instability marked by first foreign invasion and subsequent civil strife, Afghanistan is in flux artistically, religiously, and culturally. Many of Afghanistan's media producers frequently lament Afghanistan's tragic recent history and wonder where Afghanistan's media would be and what it would look like aesthetically if its path of development had not been halted just as it was emerging. This is particularly the case with television, since three years after its introduction as a new national medium, the communist coup, followed by the Soviet invasion, erupted in 1979. During this brief time period, Afghanistan's television programming consisted of nightly broadcasts of musical concerts, news, and a variety program, but no dramatic serials.

Recognizing the structural imbalances, transnational organizations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and UNESCO are trying to even the cultural playing field by training local Afghan men and women to produce their own media. By all accounts, BBC World Trust's mission is to introduce modernity, democracy, and capitalism to post-communist countries. Originally called the BBC Marshall Plan of the Mind, it was formed after the fall of the Berlin Wall in order to "to transfer skills and knowledge of democratic principles and market economies via national radio and television to assist the transition process . . ." (Mandel, 2002, p. 213). Afghanistan being a perfect candidate for the BBC's mission, their base of operations there is one of

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 248

their largest with a staff of about 200 local project employees. According to BBC World Trust's Website, "conflict and chronic instability have characterized Afghanistan's modern history" and therefore their objectives are to assist the government in creating national unity by bringing an awareness of human rights with special attention to gender rights.

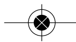
In an effort to meet their mandate, the BBC World Trust launched the Afghan Women's Hour in January of 2005, which broadcasts on RTA. This weekly variety program explores issues concerning women's role in society. Likewise, UNESCO helped the non-profit organization, Voice of Afghan Women Association, start Afghanistan's first women's community television channel by paying for broadcasting equipment and governmental registration fees to secure a frequency. With their socially conscientious mandate, these transnational organizations have a progressive multicultural and plural approach to nation building. However, the effectiveness of these media networks cannot be accepted without further analysis into the nature of collaborations between sympathetic western institutions and the lives of people in Afghanistan.

Performances of Non-Performativity and Practices of Unlooking

Yet despite the cultural exchange, Afghan audiences are quick to draw distinctions between Afghan and Indian forms of cultural expression. Even the most avid fans of Indian telenovelas make very specific delineations between "their culture" and "our culture," thereby Othering their favorite shows as foreign. They often ground their arguments in the second commandment and Islam's general stance against the representation of the human form (Armbrust, 2000; Mitchell, 2006). In addition, Islamic ways of looking are marked by lowering your gaze and practices of un-looking. Similarly, Islamic forms of performance and self-expression can best be described as the performance of non-performativity and unexpression; the exception being the Sufi order.

Therefore, in reference to the Indian dramatic serials, "music and dancing," "bright colorful clothes," "ornate accessories," "lighting of candles," among other expressions of "decadence" are understood as "Hindu forms of worshiping" and signs of "being Hindu not Muslim." Such characterizations of Hindu expressions of devotion and how it permeates Hindu cultural practices actually echo the academic concept of "darshan," which literally means "seeing" in Hindi, but more broadly describes the holistic and embodied expe-

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 249



rience of engaging with deities. Scholars of Indian culture have illustrated how images, and visuality more generally, do in fact form an integral part of Hindu modes of being (Eck, 1998; Pinney, 2004; Rajagopal, 2001).

In addition to grounding their difference in Islamic practices, Afghans also readily identify themselves as "sangeen" in contrast to their perceived notions of Hinduness. *Sangeen* is a Persian word that literally means heavy; rooted in the word for rock/stone, *sang*. Connotatively it is an adjective used to describe qualities of being reserved, rational, unemotional, and stoic. To be described as *sangeen* and be associated with its sought after virtues is something that Afghans of all genders aspire to. To achieve *sangeen*-ness entails an entire way of being and behaving, complete with its own color schemes and modes of dressing.

Therefore, it is surprising that Afghan audiences of both genders reacted unfavorably to the broadcasting of *Nargis (Narcissus)* in 2008, an Iranian dramatic serial, which by all standards is imbued with *sangeen*-ness, both aesthetically in terms of the settings and in the attributes of the protagonist, Nargis. The common complaint was verbalized as "dill em tang may showad," which literally means "it suffocates my heart," but is more broadly interpreted as lackluster, tedious, dull, and dreary. One woman explained "We have color television but it might as well be a black and white set for *Nargis*," referring to the "taareek" or dark color schemes of the show. Other people made similar comments about the dark chadors and robes of the women and men in the show.

In this respect, the concepts of *sangeen* and *darshan* are useful theoretical tools in understanding the ways in which people perceive their own and other cultures but they cannot be applied as absolute signifiers of either culture. As the case studies illustrate, in actual practice, every experience cannot adequately fulfill the hard to achieve modes of being completely *sangeen* or in a full state of *darshan*, nor can cultures be reduced to one set of homogenizing conditions.

No wonder then, that many Afghan television viewers admitted their affinity for Indian dramatic serials in contrast to the recent arrival of Iranian imports while simultaneously proclaiming their Afghan *sangeen*-ness. "What can I say, most people like 'rangahiya roshan' [bright colors]," stated a viewer. Many women, especially Kabuli women, associated the aesthetics of "bright colors" and unveiled women of Indian soaps with "azadi" or freedom/liberation. When asked about what made the Iranian soaps less liberatory, many could not answer beyond their visual differences. In fact, textual analysis reveals that the heroines in the Iranian dramatic serials tend to have more

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 250

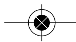
agency and be more active in the domestic and public sphere than their Indian counterparts. “Yes, its true,” one woman said, “the women drive and work outside of the home in *Nargis* but I still think *Zora* (an Indian import) is more free.”

Liberatory or Regressive? Weak Heroines and Strong Villainesses

Although for entirely different reasons from the religious critics, some women also adamantly expressed why they thought the Indian shows were regressive and as such bad role models for Afghan women. They mentioned that popular Indian soap operas such as *Henna*, *Dolhan*, and *Kum Kum* represented women in subservient and subordinate positions. They objected to the protagonists’ *Henna*, *Widya* (from *Dolhan*), and *Kum Kum*’s, “weak personalities” and “characters.” One woman stated, “I cannot believe how much abuse and torture they take from their in-laws,” while another commented, “All they do is cry and cry and cry . . . such crybabies.” According to these women, most of whom actively advocated for and demanded the shows be cancelled, the only “strong” and “intelligent” women in the shows were villainous sisters-in-law, mothers-in-law, and aunts-in-law who were perpetually conniving and strategizing how to torment or even kill the new brides in order to gain access to property and wealth bestowed upon their male relatives.

Yet overall, the responses from female viewers were positive. Although it is difficult to understand the contradiction in self dis/identifications and dis/tastes among Afghan audiences in terms of Iranian and Indian soap operas, the liberatory and empowering aspects of soap operas are well documented. Feminist media scholars have challenged the common perception that women’s genres have a “dumbing down” effect on society. Reception studies on romance novels, women’s magazines, and soap operas have revealed that in fact these genres with their focus on women’s issues offer a subversive space where women can not only escape but also challenge the male gaze and other forms of patriarchal social order and control (Das, 1995; Radway, 1991; Mankekar, 1999).

It is precisely this public engagement with familial and cultural issues pertaining to women’s rights and positions in society that is a source of strife for the Islamists and celebration for the defenders of the Indian soap operas and other genres of television programming. Arguments about the “in/suitability,” “in/appropriateness,” and/or “im/morality” of women’s representations in Indian and other serials are arguments about cultural authenticity grounded in claims about what constitutes true Afghan identity. However,

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 251


national identity cannot ever be reduced to a singular truth. A sense of a nation's sensibilities can only come into focus through the blurry lens of cultural contestations.

The Afghan Public Sphere and the Ongoing Culture War

In this context, the struggle for women's rights in Afghanistan has been a battle between modernist state policies and the more restrictive and repressive interpretations of codes encapsulated in tribal and Islamic laws since at least the turn of the twentieth century. As such, women's lives and bodies have been under the jurisdiction and regulations of tribal/religious elders and historically relegated to the private sphere. To bring these issues up for public reflection and discussion via television is dually counter-hegemonic because it enables Afghan reformers to attack the power base of religious militants and talk back to the international community which has Afghanistan in its purview of influence.

In this battle over television and gender rights, it is a mistake to interpellate or pre-judge Afghan society as "conservative," as many Western journalist accounts of the media situation have done. Granted, that conservative forces in Afghanistan have become much more powerful and militant as a result of the thirty years of warfare but it must be underlined that the cultural contestations are presently unfolding and ongoing. In other words, there are many groups vigorously fighting in the cultures wars and none can claim victory at this moment. Media activists joined by women's rights activists are challenging conservative elements to keep the media independent. Presently, the media in Afghanistan remains technically free from direct state/religious censorship, albeit precariously.

In this battle over television and gender rights, it is also a mistake to associate the discourse of progress, human rights, and modernity with the West alone. This line of thinking oversimplifies the complex encounters between the West and the East by solely crediting the production of democratic models and principles to the Western mind.

Historically, in the early twentieth century and in the late 1960s through the 1970s, it was state-sponsored media that has advocated for women's rights in Afghanistan. These media initiatives were part of the government's larger project of modernizing Afghanistan, which was launched in 1964 with the ratification of an equal rights amendment to the constitution. However, the modernist policies that attempted to end obligatory veiling and increase equal opportunities for education of women came to an abrupt halt with the

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 252

Soviet Invasion in 1979. The subsequent Occupation and Civil War gave rise to religious and tribal extremism. Out of these regimes that were severe in their doctrine and violent in its enforcement, the Taliban are of course the most notorious, though most certainly not the only ones.

In post 9/11 Afghanistan, Islamists, with the support of conservative members of the government including high-ranking justices and parliamentarians, use the new constitution to launch their attacks on the independence of media and freedom of the press. Whereas the 1964 constitution provided the pillars of support for the women's rights movement and the state television's modernist agenda, the 2004 constitution has given legitimacy to the opponents' repressive faith based claims. In the drawing of the constitution, Hamid Karzai, on the verge of elections, made compromises with Islamist groups to appease their aggrandized power base; just as he has done now with the signing of the new Shiite "Marriage" Law (see description by Boone, 2009) before the upcoming elections.

Therefore, in this "post-war" environment where the government has to readily acquiesce to the power of religio-tribal warlords and drug traffickers at the expense of the many, where the judicial system and the electoral system are fraught with corruption, where the vast majority of people think that the presidential and parliamentary elections are a sham, and where the rule of law is virtually non-existent, the closest functioning institution that offers any recourse for justice or hope for democracy is the media generally and television more specifically. Scholars have explored the potential of video, audio recordings, and print forms to mobilize social change (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1994; Ginsburg, 1998a; Juhasz & Gand, 1995), thereby revealing how marginalized groups within a society use the media in their negotiation and contestation to assert their cultural and political claims in public culture and the public sphere. An integral part of this research is scholarship on the formation of publics, counter-publics, and split publics (Appadurai, 2006; Calhoun, 1993; Dornfeld, 1998; Rajagopal, 2001).

Conclusion

It is for the reasons of basic human rights and human dignity, that Habermas's (1991) concept of the public sphere draws academics and activists from vast disciplines to invoke its power potential, despite perhaps being empirically flawed. As Calhoun (1993) reminds us, in its pure theoretical essence, the public sphere by its definition offers a third space for people to make their voices heard. As Habermas describes it, between the oppression of the state and the

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 253

tyranny of commercial culture, the public can invoke the public sphere via mass media to express their own opinions in critical dialogue with one another; thereby challenging oppressive forces/institutions by making them accountable to "the tribunal of the people." Since without a public sphere, people cannot coalesce into a strong public to voice their concerns, it is imperative to protect principles of an independent media in all nations but especially in a dystopic one like Afghanistan.

In stable countries, the terms of the debate are set and defined but in a country where guns, local militias, and physical force are the status quo, protecting the one institution which has the most representational and democratic tendencies, is particularly important. As the case of abortion rights demonstrates (Ginsburg, 1998b), controversial cultural issues also inspire violence in the West but different institutions are in place to check and balance each other's powers. In Afghanistan, wealthy media owners hire many body guards and live behind gated mansion fortresses while low level television personalities and reporters, especially female ones, are subjected to threats, physical attacks, and even death for providing people with programming they want to watch and which engages with their concerns. In Afghanistan, it can be argued, as I have, that the media "remains an institution of the public itself, operating to provide and intensify public discussion" (Habermas et al, 1974, p. 402). It has not yet "refeudalized" into a degenerative culture of consumption and fake "publicness" constructed by a highly specialized media corps of public relations professionals serving special interest groups.

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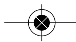

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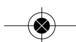

Rios 14 thru end_t2a 4/14/2011 2:06 PM Page 256

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