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## Anthropology, Feminism, and Literature: Blurring Boundaries

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### Abstract

This paper illustrates the vital relationship and the seamless bond among anthropology, feminism, and literature. The paper demonstrates that with changing times Pakhtun women have used various means, like folk songs, published literary texts, and/or visual representations to voice the gender disparity prevalent in their socio-cultural set up. The paper further discusses that the use of various genres as tools of expression have stimulated cultural ideological shifts and has given Pakhtun women agency in the past and the present.

**Keywords:** Pakhtun women, ideology, agency, Pashto poems and folk songs

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### Introduction

Anthropology and Literature are two of the disciplines which creatively address socio-cultural and political issues. Researchers and scholars in both disciplines engage in looking at many intersectional and cross-cutting issues from their particular perspectives. Feminism, a discipline in itself too, is perhaps one of the main central threads running through both these areas. This paper illustrates the vital relation among the three, and looks at the seamless bond, which usually blurs the definitive disciplinary divide among them. I focus on whether literary texts can be used as secondary source to support primary (feminist) anthropological data.

What are the different literary conventions, genres, and themes through which literary expressions support anthropological problems? And can literature provide (female) agency and account for ideological shifts?

### Methodology

In this paper I demonstrate how some Pakhtun women, in Peshawar, Pakistan use literary genres to voice their concerns and thus express their agency as social actors. Pakhtuns are the ethnic group that primarily lives in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in the northwest and Baluchistan in the west of Pakistan and most parts of Afghanistan. Pakhtuns are generally considered gender biased, gender segregated, and patriarchally structured people. In this paper, I argue that according to non-Pakhtun standards, Pakhtun women may have restricted agency or perhaps no agency; however, within the patriarchal structures, without challenging the cultural set up per se, Pakhtun women do have different ways to express and practice agency. One of the ways, through which they practice agency, is by voicing their emotions and concerns through folk songs and other literary genres. In this paper I use some Pashto<sup>1</sup> poems and folk songs to prove that literature, as a tool, can strategically support primary (feminist) anthropological data to voice and advocate social, cultural, and gender issues.

My primary data includes formal interviews of some Pashto scholars, poets, and writers. These interviews were intermittently conducted in 2007 and 2009. My secondary data, which I contest will support my primary data, includes translated Pashto poems, some couplets from Pashto folk songs, and the feminist rendition of the folk song "*Bibi Shireenay*," which was aired on various Pakistani TV channels but was blocked from mainstream media after a couple of telecasts by the then provincial government, Muthaida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA).<sup>2</sup>

In order to support my argument I use some anthropological theoretical frameworks like the role of ideology (Althusser, 1971); processes of recognition (Pêcheux, 1982); theory of structuration (Giddens, 1979); and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). I employ these frameworks to explicate the ideological underpinnings of the Pakhtun culture and its impact on women's agency as social subjects. In addition, I also use some feminist theoretical frameworks, like the importance of positionality (Abu-Lughod 2008; Naples 2003) and the insider/outsider status (Collins 1991; Naples 2003). With the help of feminist paradigms I show how female literary scholars and poets effect, validate, and give voice to gender issues in a patriarchal society.

In order to maintain participants' confidentiality I use pseudonyms except for Salma Shaheen who is a well known Pashto scholar and poet.<sup>3</sup> I use some of Shaheen's published poems and interview excerpts in this paper to support my stance that Pakhtun women use literary genres as agential means of self-expression.

### **Anthropology, Feminism, and Literature: The Triadic Merge**

The disciplines of anthropology, feminism, and literature have been blended and merged at different times and in different cultures. This mix is not a haphazard or an accidental combination. These disciplines share some common sensibilities and are sensitive to similar issues; they may have different manifestations of expression but they complement and supplement each other in a variety of ways. For example, Mascia-Lees et al (1989) underscore the connection between anthropology and feminism by stating:

Feminist theory is... a politics directed towards securing recognition that the feminine is as crucial an element of the human as the masculine, and thus a politics skeptical and critical of traditional "universal truths" concerning human behavior. Similarly, anthropology is grounded in politics: it aims to secure recognition that the non-Western is as crucial an element of the human as the Western and thus is skeptical and critical of Western claims to knowledge and understanding (p. 8).

While Visweswaran (1988), connecting anthropological and literary texts observes, "experimental ethnography has been strangely reluctant to embrace other forms of writing, like the novel, short story, diary, or autobiography...At a time when literary critics read such texts as expressive culture, why can't anthropologists?" (p. 39). Similarly, Geertz (2003) states, "the social sciences needs to be supplemented by the introduction of [research tools] from humanistic research and analysis—symbol, meaning, metaphor, plot, story, motif, interpretation—if we are to actually engage our subject rather than merely attack it" (p. 30). Whereas, Joubert and Schlkwyk (1999), with reference to the oral tradition, state, "the important role that oral tradition (folklore) plays in the reconstruction of the historical and cultural existence of non-literate societies demands an interdisciplinary approach" (p. 29). While Maynard (2002) aptly observes, "Poets, too, observe and offer explanations for what they see around them....poetry like anthropology looks at everyday experiences" (p. 220).

As such, the common ground among the three disciplines is to study issues which occur as a result of the historical and material realities of a culture. These disciplines interrogate socio-political, economic, and social justice issues and

demonstrate concerns about representation and agency that various individuals have (or not) in their respective cultural structures. In this paper, I argue that literature, especially poetry, acts as a conduit for women's expression in patriarchal societies. It is one of the means through which they practice agency and get their unheard voices heard.

### **Gendered Voices: Positionality of the Speaker(s)**

In any given society or culture, the positionality of the individual influences and validates (or not) what he or she says and does. Apart from economic, political, and social positions, the gendered positionality of the individual according to Naples (2003) "influence[s] how problems are defined, which knowers are identified and are given credibility, how interactions are interpreted, and how ethnographic [and/or other] narratives are constructed" (p. 48). Shah, a male Pashto scholar, explains how the gender binary culturally operates among the Pakhtuns. He explains,

When you talk about Pakhtun culture as a male dominated culture, "man" is not a label for a single gender. A person has to fulfill the Pakhtun ethical requirements to qualify as a "man." And if a person does not qualify he is considered "un-man[ly]." That is why, those women who have [Pakhtun ethical] qualities also qualify.... therefore, a Pukhtana (female of Pakhtun) can have more "manhood" than a man. Manhood is a skill, a quality [not a gender label according to sex among the Pakhtuns].

Shah further explains why some gender specific traditions are carried on among the Pakhtuns. He says,

A Pakhtun's or a Pukhtana's character is developed and judged according to the tenets of Pakhtunwali.<sup>4</sup> When he or she develops his or her character according to those standards only then they become qualified to be a Pakhtun.... [When] anything, anyone, or any circumstances that prove dangerous or contrary to a Pakhtun's honor and his Pakhtun-ness, based on Pakhtunwali, he is bound to resist.

Likewise, in Pashto it is proverbially said, "You don't speak Pukhto; you do Pukhto."<sup>5</sup> Alcott (1988) also states:

The concept of "woman" is [not] determined solely by external elements and that the woman herself is merely a passive recipient of an identity created by these forces. Rather, she herself is part of the historicized, fluid movement,

and she therefore actively contributes to the context within which her position can be delineated (p. 434).

As such Shah also suggests that within the Pakhtun culture the “position” of a woman is determined by her actions in accordance with Pakhtunwali or the Pakhtun ethical code. However, Alcoff (1988) observes that, “the concept of woman as positionality shows how women use their positional perspective as a place from which values are interpreted and constructed rather than as a locus of an already determined set of values” (p. 434). The fact remains that the Pakhtuns are a patriarchal people. Salma Shaheen is of the opinion,

Like natural feelings, emotions...they [Pakhtun men] do not care about them. Otherwise the Pakhtuns are nice people. According to their psyche, they really appreciate brave women.

Shaheen states that Pakhtun men do not care much about personal emotions. Perhaps, they do not lack emotions but they are very restraint in showing their emotions publically. For example, Khan (1990, p. 27) and Lindholm (1988, p. 227, p. 233) explicate the role of emotions in defining the overall Pakhtun male ethnic identity that validates the Pakhtun male to ‘belong’ to the community. Interestingly, Lindholm (1988) compares the (Swat) Pakhtuns to the courtiers of Louis XIV and suggests, “The courtier [and a Pakhtun], for his self-preservation and advancement within his world, must therefore practice emotional restraint” (p. 231). As a part of cultural expectation, perhaps emotional restraint led to the composition, singing, and passing-on of poetic traditions, especially folk songs, in the Pakhtun culture. Poetic expressions (at times accompanied by music) are sometimes used as a means to vent one’s pent up emotions; they provide the cathartic effect. I discuss Pashto folk songs and poetry in detail in the subsequent sections.

### **Pashto Folk songs and Poems: The Cadenced Catharsis**

In this section I draw examples from Pashto folk songs, Salma Shaheen’s poems, and the lyrics of the feminist rendition of a Pashto folk song “*Bibi Shireenay: Where Honor Comes First*,” which was aired on some Pakistani TV channels for a limited period of time. The aim of this section is to illustrate firstly, that in earlier times Pakhtun women composed and sang Pashto folk songs to express their emotions and desires for their lovers. Secondly, with exposure to education and media, the themes of love and separation became more nuanced. Besides, themes like cultural and patriarchal oppression became part of the written tradition;

followed by a more explicit representation of women's voice(s) and issues portrayed through the visual media.

### **Pashto Folk songs: The Oral Expression**

The Pakhtuns are a gendered-segregated society, who on most occasions, require men and women to convene in separate spaces. Therefore, composing and using folk songs as a mode of expression and communication should not come as a surprise. With regard to Pashto folk songs Salma Shaheen explains,

We have 85% folklore that is created by women. Why they created it [folk songs] is because they are the marginalized class. These Pakhtuns have a strange psyche...where [romantic] interest is generated or developed, there has to be a separation. You cannot meet anyone [you like]. When you cannot meet anyone you are unhappy and when you are happy art is created...for creativity separation is necessary.

Since the Pakhtuns are a gendered-segregated society it is not easy to meet one's lover or beloved in public. Therefore, couples resort to other discreet ways and places for meeting each other. The following lines from a folk song reveal a beloved's plight:

Secretly, by the spring waters,  
My love, let's meet.  
Secretly, in my heart, I missed you a lot,  
But, I will not welcome (greet) you in front of someone else!<sup>6</sup> (Shaheen, 1995, p.70)

These lines are uttered by a female because in the Pashto text the place suggested for meeting is the "*gudar gharaa*" or by the spring/river bed. In some rural areas women go to fetch water from the rivers, springs or wells for daily chores. This activity is exclusively performed by the women. Therefore, a woman would only invite her lover to meet her when she would go to fetch water because she would be away from home and from an elder's eye. During fetching water women are usually accompanied by other girlfriends, who act as confidant and keep the meeting(s) a secret. However, the speaker tells her lover that although they will meet secretly but she will not openly greet him in public. Perhaps, she cannot do that because of the spatially segregated arrangements and/or according to cultural expectations she cannot publically reveal her feelings for him.

In another example from a Pashto folk song we can hear a bride waiting for her groom:

On the red bridal bed,  
 Without my love,  
 I feel summoned  
 By the fires of hell  
 .....  
 The bed looks attractive with the lover  
 I loathe beds without the lover! (Shaheen, 1995, p.70)

In conjunction with Shaheen's comment that Pashto folk songs and poetry is mostly composed by women there are some linguistic cues in the above lines that suggest a female voice here as well. In the first quartet, "on the red bridal bed" suggests that it is a bride (read a woman is saying this) waiting for her groom to come and be with her on the wedding night. According to the cultural customs among Pakhtuns and other Pakistani communities, first, the color red symbolizes wedding, as brides usually wear red bridal dresses. Second, on the wedding night, after the celebrations and traditional rituals are over the bride is taken to her room to wait for the groom. The groom maybe busy with the male guests celebrating the occasion or his friends may deliberately or teasingly be keeping him away from the bride. However, keeping up with the Pakhtuns' habit of restraining emotions in public, the bride is pondering the above lines to herself and not to friends or family members. While the groom, too, would not be able to tell his friends that he wants to leave them and instead be with the bride. Yet, it should be kept in mind that these folk songs are sung on festive occasions by women, suggesting any bride and groom's feelings on their wedding night. The separation and subsequent waiting of a beloved is also expressed in the following lines:

Oh Moth! May God bring thee tonight!  
 I am like a flared-up flame,  
 Of love-lamp!<sup>7</sup> (Shaheen, 1995, p.70)

In these lines, it's a woman's voice again. According to the original Pashto lines the word used for moth, has a gendered noun ending "*patangaa*," the gendered verb ending "*raoraa*," suggesting a male moth<sup>8</sup> and thus a male lover. Besides, in the original Pashto lines (see note 8) the person speaking or the "I" is qualified by the gendered verb ending "*bulaa*" which in Pashto suggests a female voice. However, in the following lines the moth means a female:

The moth sacrificed (sati) itself over the candle flame  
 The bee enjoys “topping” the flower! (Shaheen, 1995, p. 70)

Here, unlike the previous lines, the moth refers to a woman because it has sacrificed itself through *Sati* (original word used) over the candle flame. *Sati* refers to the old Hindu practice where widows would willingly or coercively immolate themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. Since this sacrifice was made only by women, the moth, in these lines symbolically refers to a woman. While the bee is busy enjoying being “on top” of a flower: an allusion to the bee penetrating a flower either for nectar or pollination.

In spite of linguistic cues in the folk songs and Shaheen’s revelation, it was a little difficult for me to understand and believe how Pakhtun men and women, in the past and more rigid times, not only managed to meet but the women also got all these folk songs communicated and circulated among people. I asked:

**Anoosh Khan:** As you say that women created most of this [Pashto] folklore, so how did it get commercialized? I mean during those times, many women did not know how to write, neither were there publication facilities nor could women go out of their houses so frequently.

**Salma Shaheen:** This happened through the word of mouth, from one place to another. For example, according to the traditions of those old times, poetry or folklore was a part of engagement ceremonies, weddings, or any festive celebrations and [for women] poetry composition was considered a skill. Women used to play musical instruments like small drums and tambourines. This was done by women [in their separate domain], inside the house. Outside, in the men’s quarters, men would play their instruments like the sitar and rabaab (stringed instruments). These festive musical gatherings had another benefit: during the quiet of the night, the womenfolk, through these songs, would make other people (read men) hear their hearts’ desires. Besides, during weddings [young] men and women would have [sanctioned] freedom to see each other and/or like each other. But it was very seldom that lovers could otherwise meet openly in public.

By looking at some of the linguistic cues in the folk songs validates Shaheen’s claim that most Pashto folk songs were composed by women in order to express their desires that could not be publically expressed or practiced. The explicit female desire expressed through folk songs, sung at celebrations amongst the women to be overheard by men, suggests that their messages would get communicated loud and clear!



Interestingly, Shaheen is a product of the Pakhtun patriarchal culture and expectations but at the same time, through her literary works, she expresses her own concerns and also voices the concerns of other Pakhtun women as well. As such, she performs a double duty: firstly, her literary works give her the agency to express, explicate, expose, and critique some of the Pakhtun cultural traditions; and secondly, through her works she also echoes the voices of other Pakhtun women and at times men as well. This stance becomes clear as I discuss some of Shaheen's poems in the following section.

### Salma Shaheen's Poetry: The Written Expression

Shaheen, as a Pashto poet and short story writer, informed me:

In my creative pieces, I usually write about class division and gender issues... [Pakhtunwomen] possess a lot of skills and talent. It is because of our cultural and traditional expectations that all this [female] talent remains dormant.... I wrote my first poem, with reference to gender in 1980. It was called "Khazaa"(Woman). When it got published, I used to recite it a lot in literary gatherings (mushairo ke) and people would really like it.

Handelman (1994) observes, "to compose a text is to empower it—to set it loose in the world as an autonomous force with the intent to persuade its reader of something" (p. 344). Therefore, looking at some of Shaheen's poetic themes it becomes evident that poetry provides her the agentive means to critique the (gendered) cultural and social issues prevalent in the Pakhtun society. Hilsdon (2007) states, "Agency needs to address the gaps between everyday reflection and practices and hegemonic discourses or symbolic structures" (p. 127). This is precisely what Shaheen's literary work does. In the poem *O Beautiful Damsel!* Shaheen (2004, pp. 55-56) sketches a vivid picture of a (Pakhtun) woman who, complete in her faculties and talents, has to succumb to male pressures:

Enchanting shades of beauty  
you are Beauty, you are Love  
you are Reason  
you are Peace  
but in this jungle, full of beasts,  
jackals<sup>9</sup> and wolves,  
who are blind to Love,  
they crush Beauty to dust,  
and burn Reason to ashes,  
and mess up Peace.

Compromise is your universe  
 and your hopes very delicate.  
 Your skills and rhetoric  
 you beautiful artisan,  
 you sacrifice all this to a man  
 even though you live with him  
 like a deer in fear  
 from a predator in a jungle.

In this poem Shaheen portrays a sad but true picture of what happens to some women in the (Pakhtun) society. In spite of their physical beauty, mental capabilities, and professional skills they are married off to men who are absolutely insensitive to their beauty and talents. Besides, Shaheen's imagery in the first stanza of the poem is very strong; she compares men to beasts and the marital cosmos of (some) women to a jungle. In the second stanza, Shaheen illustrates the fate of most women: a life of compromise, dependence, and fear.

Shaheen, through *O Beautiful Damsel!* explicates the life of most women who are bound to be married off without given any choice. However, in her poem *A Question* (2004, pp. 137-138) she portrays what usually happens to a couple who is in love:

Our griefs  
 Are strange;  
  
 Though we love each other  
 we are happy for each other  
 but we can't share our love, our happiness  
 with each other.  
 You have the mountain of modesty to climb  
 and I, my ego to overcome.  
 Tormenting and torturing our souls in vain.  
 This is no life.  
 Like a gambler for a win after a loss  
 Like an obsessed person chases a mirage.

At times a thought crosses my mind  
 to ask you what we will say to each other  
 after the winds of time have withered our youths  
 and our eyes have no strength to see  
 what the hell was that ego for?  
 What good was that modesty?

In this poem, Shaheen reiterates the themes expressed by women's voices in Pashto folk songs: the themes of separation, unexpressed love, and emotional restraint. However, Shaheen explains the reason for the lovers' unexpressed love: one has "the mountain of modesty to climb" while the other the "ego to overcome;" thus "tormenting and torturing our souls in vain." It is pertinent to note here that one of the lovers is modest; perhaps the man, because of the Pakhtun cultural expectations he cannot express his love publicly and maybe did not get a chance to express it otherwise. Whereas, being a Pakhtun woman, in accordance with the cultural mores, she cannot take the lead in romantic expressions; the woman here cannot let go of her ego and make the first move. A similar idea of male reticence is also heard in a popular folk song where the singer wants to go and greet his beloved but he refrains from doing so because he does not want to mar his beloved's honor in public.<sup>10</sup> As a result, both the lovers will remain separated because of their *habitus* (Bourdieu 1979) or cultural disposition they have 'learned' to act as they are doing so.

In the poem *Love Enemies*, Shaheen (2004, pp. 235-237) paints the overall Pakhtun patriarchal structure that prevents not only women from decision making but also controls men's choices as well. She says:

You lustful,  
selfish  
Pakhtuntribes!  
For how long  
restrictions,  
traditions,  
tying, untying (the knots)  
will be of your choice?  
For how long will intelligent,  
and handsome young men—  
capable young men  
for how long will innocent,  
oppressed young women  
be crucified at the altar of your choice  
and  
murdered publically?  
The reins of whose heart and mind  
are in the hands of another, faraway.  
What is love  
with an empty body  
and restless soul?  
Ignorant of time,

you murderers of human generations.  
 Why do you say,  
 no one can be forced into anything?

In the above lines Shaheen explicitly states that life choices and decisions, among the Pakhtuns, are usually made by the (male/patriarchal) elders. Those who decide the fate of others, most of the times, do not realize the damaging effects their decisions can have on the relationship of the concerned individuals and on the subsequent generations as well. Perhaps due to the gendered cultural and social constraints, Shaheen's poetic persona (2004, p. 8) in lines from *I Wish I Were a Kid Again* wishfully states:

I wish I were a blooming bud, and  
 blossoming in a garden,  
 without attracting a gaze.  
 I wish I were a kid again.

I wish they never gazed at me  
 the way they do now.  
 And my parents could rejoice my being,  
 I wish I were a kid again.

These apparently simple lines are powerful! The persona wants to be a kid again because as a grown up woman she feels the constant "gaze" of people and wishes "they never gazed at me as they do now." Obviously, this gaze refers to the male gaze. However, according to Pakhtun cultural interpretation this gaze can also mean the gaze of other women, especially those who scrutinize and analyze her to guess how good a wife she can be for their sons and/or brothers. Therefore, the persona feels constantly gazed at by both men and women, and thus making her parents conscious about their grown up daughter as well. Not that her parents do not rejoice her womanhood but the happiness now comes with a price: the risk of ensuring that they have raised a physically beautiful, culturally acceptable, and a socially capable daughter. At the same time parents have to make sure that she is safe from the socially unacceptable gazes as well. Hence, the persona wishes she were a child again because then she would be free from the cultural burdens and expectations of womanhood in the Pakhtun society. Nonetheless, Salma Shaheen is optimistic and confident about the gradual progress and achievements of Pakhtun women. She thinks,

Now times have changed and so have I... And they [parents] want that their daughters should become doctors, professors, and adopt a professional line and they should introduce themselves, and make people [society] accept them...not as females...no! But as [equal] citizens.

Shaheen's claim is endorsed when some Pakhtun women manage to go a step further than her; they move from the printed text to the visual media to represent Pakhtun women voices.

***'Bibi Shireenay: Where Honor Comes First'<sup>11</sup>: The Visual Expression***

In addition to folk literature, communicated through the word of mouth, and published literature, Pakhtun women have also used visual media to rewrite and re-represent some folk songs from a purely feminist standpoint. One such example is the feminist rendition of the Pashto folk song called "*Bibi Shireenay*." I choose to call it a 'feminist' representation because in its various versions the lyrics of this folk song are solely romantic in nature; a lover's praises and requests to his beloved. Until now I have heard and seen this folk song sung and performed only by male artists. The version of this song which I incorporate in this paper is written by another female Pashto poet Zubaida Khatoon; produced and directed by a Pakhtun female anthropologist Samar Minallah<sup>12</sup>; sung by a male artist Gulraiz Tabassum; and sponsored by a national women's NGO Aurat Foundation and the German organization The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ),<sup>13</sup> to advocate women's rights appropriated according to the Pakhtun cultural framework. *Bibi Shireenay* illustrates the everyday life of an average rural Pakhtun woman:

Bibi Shireenay!  
 You wake up with the rooster's first call,  
 The day's chores wait you a while;

Morning till evening you tire yourself away,  
 Sleep and rest are at bay.

Your life passes away serving others,  
 And when you fall ill...  
 The shrines and amulets become your fate.

Nobody acknowledges your hard work,  
 Though you tire yourself away.

You surrendered your lands to *Lala*,

And now you have but empty hands...  
Bibi Shireenay!

You are the honor and integrity of the house,  
Your chastity...  
Makes *Baba* twist his turban with pride,  
Bibi Shireenay!

Bibi Shireenay is a common Pashto name for women. “Bibi” means miss/lady and Shireenay means the “sweet one.” Here it is a metaphor for any Pakhtun woman. The song illustrates that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Pakhtun cultural traditions, in the rural and at times in urban areas, are above all forms of law: divine and man-made. Thus, Bibi Shireenay, the epitome of female sacrifice, serves others throughout her life as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother but at the cost of giving up her own identity, individuality, and rights. Therefore, she sometimes “willingly” gives her share of the inherited land to *Lala* (older brother), and is made to reinforce cultural gender stereotypes which “may refer to customary laws, meaning laws that are not written into legislated statute books, and sometimes includes customary practices that are built on commonly accepted usages and traditions” (Cook and Cusack, 2010, p. 34). While at other times, she serves as the symbol of honor for *Baba* (father), portraying that “women are thought to embody the honor of men, thus enabling the subordination of women through the control of behaviors not approved by family members” (Cook and Cusack, 2010, pp. 35-36). *Bibi Shireenay* does not portray the life style of all Pakhtun women in totality. For example, the song does not represent intersections of class, education, and spatiality. Yet, it serves to create awareness for and among many women and men.

## Discussion

Examining Pashto folk songs, poems, and media representation shows that although the Pakhtun society is patriarchal yet women within the cultural structures get the opportunity to practice their agency. In this paper I use different literary genres to show some of the many ways through which some Pakhtun women practice agency and in turn become an agential medium or voice for those women who cannot do the same. Alcoff (1988) states:

The position that women find themselves in can be actively utilized (rather than transcended) as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply the place where a meaning can be discovered (the meaning of femaleness) (p. 434).

The folk songs and the poems discussed above reveal that women in the Pakhtun social structure do not rebel against their customs, traditions, or even men per se. The Pakhtun women are born within a certain *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) or dispositions and share experiences which they unconsciously internalize and transmit onto generations. However, sometimes people can acquire new dispositions and change social structures. As such, even Pakhtun women with the passage of time have acquired new dispositions through education, mobility, social exposure, and technological access. Yet, these women have stayed within their social structures and critiqued them rather than out rightly rebelling against the cultural setup.

Althusser (1971) believes that the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) *interpellate* individuals subtly; covertly affecting their ideological thinking, opinions, and actions. As a result of interpellation, the process of *recognition* (Pêcheux 1982) begins and an individual can either accept or reject a social (subject) position or else he or she can agree to disidentification, that is, “working the subject form, by its overthrow, its rearrangement, rather than a categorical endorsement of its details or its categorical abolition” (Pêcheux, 1982, pp. 156-159).

The Ideological State Apparatuses, like education and the media, have a strong effect on molding public thoughts, opinions, behaviors, and attitudes: one teaches while the other visually projects the teachings. According to Appadurai (1996), mediascapes or different forms of (visual) media, “help to constitute narratives of the Other and protonarratives of possible lives, fantasies that could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement” (pp. 35-36). Pakhtun women have been pressurized and at times oppressed by cultural ideology but at the same time they have also benefitted from the dialectical influence of the ISAs. In other words, ISAs like culture, religion, and family have restricted the agency of Pakhtun women but at the same time exposure to ISAs like education and media has enhanced their horizons and they have managed to find alternate ways, like literary expressions, to practice their agency within the prevalent social structures.

As such, female Pakhtun folk song composers, poets, and media persons, have also adopted the position of disidentification: they neither passively accept nor violently rebel but strategically critique cultural patriarchal structures through literary and/or visual expressions. For example, the female composers of Pashto folk songs remain within their female spaces and sing their songs to be heard by the men (or their lovers) in the men’s quarters. In their songs the women express

their desires and discreetly plan meetings with their lovers by the spring/river beds; yet they confess that they will not welcome or greet their lovers in public.

Shaheen expresses her gender concerns and tradition-based discrimination against both men and women; however, she does not rebel or act as a complete outlaw against the cultural set up. On the contrary, she decides to stay within the social structure and critique it. Perhaps, this is a better position. By staying within the social group her criticism will be validated as an insider's experiential critique rather than an outsider's solution for rescuing the Pakhtun damsels in distress! Collins (1991) also believes that "rendering experienced reality [i]s a valid source for critiquing sociological facts" (p. 54).

Similarly, the feminist audio-visual rendition of *Bibi Shireenay* also shows that the lyricist, director, and producer(s) gender appropriate a well known Pashto folk song. They use a rural backdrop: depicting rural life (which is the majority's way of life); everyday chores; common issues, and traditional expectations. Besides, the song aptly illustrates that in the given cultural arrangement women's "desires do not necessarily focus on their own needs; rather they involve the needs and well being of their children [and others]" (Raval, 2009, p. 500). The song is written, directed, produced, and primarily enacted by women but it is sung by a male artist. Perhaps, this is another culturally appropriate technique: validating the required change in gendered ideology and expectations voiced by a man; a man's "voice" literally and metaphorically makes the song, the culturally required gender sensitization, and its acceptance more plausible.

## Conclusion

Juxtaposing Pashto folk songs, some poems, and the feminized rendition of *Bibi Shireenay* shows that according to non-Pakhtun standards Pakhtun women may not have complete agency; they only have restricted agency. But Saltzman (1987) suggests, "that people can and do make conscious choices within their historical constraints, choices that are not always consistent with our theories about their ideologies" (p. 550). For example, during our interview, Shaheen also mentions the changing perceptions about Pakhtun cultural expectations. She says,

If I didn't want to get married, there was no problem. I could say I didn't want to [get married]. But I didn't have the guts to say that I want to marry such and such a man or could marry him. Now things may have changed a little...because of the support parents give their children. They take their



emotions into account. Now I think that a mother or father understand a girl's thoughts and her nature better [than before].

Earlier Shaheen had also stated that parents now wanted their daughters to be recognized “not as females...no! But as [equal] citizens.” Perhaps, some Pakhtun women may not have the freedom to choose their partners, professions, and life styles but with the passage of time a gradual change is underway. Mahmood (2001) suggests, “Even in instances when an explicit *feminist* agency is difficult to locate, there is a tendency to look for expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male domination” (p. 206). Similarly, Raval (2009) also believes:

When individuals act within the boundaries of their social structures but do not challenge them, they might appear to outsiders as “victims” of an oppressive system who lack agency. It is only when one examines their lived experiences from their perspectives that a more nuanced picture of their agency emerges (p. 505).

Thus, literary expressions, whether in the form of folk songs, published poems, and/or visually expressed through media, should be understood and accepted as agential tools used by women in the Pakhtun culture. Finnegan (1991) explains:

A [folk] tradition, furthermore, has to be *used* by people for it to continue to exist. And whether in artistic, personal, or political contexts, this actual *usage* maybe as liable to exploit, to modify, or to play with tradition as to follow it blindly (p. 112).

The above discussion explicates the flexible and culturally situated nature of agency. In accordance with the theory of structuration, it is the Pakhtun cultural structure that both enables and constrains women as social actors (Giddens, 1979, pp. 69-70; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 1003; Hays, 1994, p. 61). The blending of Pashto folk songs, modern poetry, and visual media highlights the dialectical relationship between female agency and Pakhtun cultural structure. On one hand, some ideological apparatuses like, family, religion, and culture restrain Pakhtun female agency. While on the other hand, other ideological apparatuses like education and media act as agential tools that raise female consciousness and give women a platform to express their views about the culturally prevalent gender issues. Thus, bringing an ideological shift among the Pakhtun women in particular and the Pakhtun culture in general.

Furthermore, by blurring the boundaries between anthropology, feminism, and literature this paper verifies that all three disciplines may use different methods of inquiry and styles of expression but all three inquire, critique, and advocate for socio-political, cultural, and gender issues alike.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Pashto is the language spoken by Pakhtuns.
- <sup>2</sup> MMA is the right wing (Islamic/religious) political party in Pakistan. It formed the provincial government in the Pakhtunkhwa province during 2002-2007.
- <sup>3</sup> I use Dr. Salma Shaheen's name with her explicit consent.
- <sup>4</sup> Pakhtunwali or the code of ethics plays a very vital role in the Pakhtun culture. Pakhtunwali traditionally includes hospitality (*mel mastiya*) towards anybody once someone steps onto their property; the right to refuge (*nanawati/nenawatay*); and revenge (*badal*).
- <sup>5</sup> Pashto, the language, is pronounced *Pukhto* in the northern or hard dialect of Pashto. I'm using this proverb in the sense that is discussed in detail by Benedicte Grima (1992) in *The Performance of Emotion Among Paxtun Women*.
- <sup>6</sup> Translation of all Pashto folk songs, Salma Shaheen's poems, and the lyrics of Bibi Shireenay are done by the author.
- <sup>7</sup> The flared up flame is an illusion to a burning passion.
- <sup>8</sup> In Pashto these lines are: *Patangaa nun shapa de rub raoraa/Laka deewa de meenae bula aimaa*. The underlined words suggest the grammatical gendered distinctions.
- <sup>9</sup> In Pashto, Jackal is used in the derogatory sense; it symbolizes cowardice, treachery, and betrayal.
- <sup>10</sup> For details listen to Shams ur Rehman Shams' "Te che pa baam banday walara wae" (While you were standing at the entrance), sung by Gulraiz Tabbasum (and some other singers). Here I specifically refer to lines: "*Zra raata wai che wersha te pukhtana oka/Ghulae che pata shwama da mein staa haya ta katul!*"
- <sup>11</sup> Traditional versions of this song can also be found on various media.
- <sup>12</sup> Samar Minallah is a visual Anthropologist. She has other female oriented media representations to her credit as well.
- <sup>13</sup> Now known as the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation) or GIZ.

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