

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Objective: I intend to conduct a pre-dissertation research study on the changing contours of the media in Pakistan. Specifically, the study builds on my earlier work on Urdu popular fiction and seeks to investigate how these stories have recently been incorporated as television plays in the exploding milieu of multiple TV channels in Pakistan.

Argument: My MA fieldwork involved archival work and interviews with writers and editors of various women's digests. One of the key issues I focused on was the role of cell phones in creating new sensibilities within the writers' community. For instance, I found out that a large number of digest narratives are now being drawn from real life experiences readers share with the writers. Whereas previously readers would communicate through published letters mediated by the editors; now they directly converse with writers. The proliferation of cell phones enables this new "intimacy" since writers rarely meet their readers. There is thus a 'transient coming together' of women (in most cases) unconnected by kinship or ethnicity. In other words, a sociability is formed between strangers with its own sensory feel of rhythm and sound. Having explored the role of cell phone technology in terms of creating new formations within this community; for my doctoral research, I now aim to examine another transformation: the change from printed stories to televised plays. Factors such as licensing for private channels, their need to fill airtime and the initial success of televised plays based on digest narratives has created an expanding niche in the electronic media for digest writers. Thus, digest narratives that previously circulated in print form, in the past decade, have increasingly been adapted for the visual media. Historically digest narratives were discursive sites where middle class women, as writers, could present and critique notions of respectable femininity leading to new kinds of debates in terms of portrayals and performance of women's ethical comportment. Whereas the print form allowed for the readers to use their imagination, the visual form, I argue, has opened up new kinds of spaces to discuss, adhere to or contest notions of propriety, modesty and morality. Partly the visual representations are leading toward new interpretations because the televised form has a larger reach and its audience consists of those who do not read digests (such as the unschooled or the elite English speaking strata). For example, I interviewed a member of the "third gender" (*hijra*) community whose regular engagement with these dramas brings forward the contrast between her life and the socially constituted ideals of domesticity this genre normally represents. In this way, women digest writers' fiction and the accompanying portrayed notions of how to be a woman in contemporary Pakistan are now also being received and critically evaluated by newly formed publics.

Theoretical Background and Methods: My work is situated in a body of literature (Abu Lughod: 2005; Brian Larkin: 2002 and Charles Hirschkind: 2009) that explores media and technology as a negotiation between the material properties of technologies being introduced and the particular effects in forming new affects and sensibilities. Within this framework, I will conduct six weeks of preliminary research by interviewing writers (in Sialkot, Lahore, Karachi and Rawalpindi) and directors/producers (in Lahore and Karachi) to explore: how do writers interact with these new publics; how do they view the financial and travel/mobility changes television script writing entails; how do producers/directors select one digest narrative over another; how are changes in plotline made; how are decisions regarding the portrayal of characters made and what are the kinds of competing discourses these portrayals have led to. Such questions will enable me to explore how the new media incorporates digest narratives into a visual form.