

## **Stereotypes of Muslim Women in the Post-9/11 Era:**

### **An Analysis of the *Burka Avenger***

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In August of 2013 the animated action-television series *Burka Avenger* was released in Pakistan, quickly garnering the attention of the international mainstream media for the seeming paradox of its progressive framing of the burka. Combining superhero plot lines that resonate with both the *Batman* franchise or the US-American comic book series *Ms Marvel* (Marvel Comics) and the more negative cultural stereotypes of Muslim women, the *Burka Avenger* provocatively situates the woman under the burka as a superheroine of sorts. Disrupting the static and essentialized imaginings of Muslim women that dominate European and North American popular culture today, that frame women in burkas as oppressed, victimized, and backwards, the TV show offers a number of different ways for audiences to rethink the collectivized other in the mainstream media (Ayotte and Husain 125). First, it makes a series of interesting remarks about the audience's cultural familiarity with the burka and its powerful visuality that propels both the character and the narrative forward, repurposing the garment for audiences. Secondly, the program's origin story tells viewers something new about Pakistan's socio-political landscape, through which its characters must manoeuvre. Audiences encounter a woman who not only educates children but also heroically protects them fighting for education and equality. Lastly, its subject considers in part the Orientalist tropes that identify representations of women in burkas through simple binary forms of identification such as West-East, secular-religious, dominant-submissive, civilized-barbaric or modern-traditional. In light of these characterizations and the polarizing debates that continue to circulate in the Western<sup>1</sup> public sphere about the burka and its symbolic meanings, the garment has emerged as a generic signifier that not only singles out Islamic fundamentalism but also Muslim women as other,

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<sup>1</sup> Within this article, the term West is used to refer to the socially and historically constructed category, a position of power through which some nations have imposed values, norms and narratives on other parts of the world (Hesford 4). Gillian Whitlock in *Soft Weapons* (2007) reminds us "The West can only be defined relationally. It is not a geographic location but a locus of symbolic and grounded power relations emanating from the United States and Europe; there is no ground for identifying an essential 'Western' subject" (qtd. in Hesford 7).

framing Islam as morally inferior, irrational, backwards and barbaric (Moallem 8; Skalli 47). Yet, in spite of these politically charged discourses, the *Burka Avenger* offers a series of compelling counter-examples for viewers in lieu of such sensationalist representations.



Fig. 1. Titling sequence from the *Burka Avenger* gazing over Halwa-pur.

In this article, I analyze the forms of representation that dominate the *Burka Avenger*, those that offer viewers a conceptual space where they can confront their collective fears and anxieties when encountering visually loaded symbols of Islamic iconoclasm. By simultaneously deploying and retooling powerful cultural icons, the *Burka Avenger* effectively counters hegemonic representations that situate the burka as an icon of women's oppression. Taking my cue from Lila Abu-Lughod and Mireille Rosello's discussion of stereotypes as discursive constructs, I show how the representations and concepts deployed in this TV show are productive in resisting stereotypical representations of the burka (and the women who wear them).

### The "Origin Story": Title Sequence

This is Halwa-Pur. My city, my home. A tragic incident left me orphaned as a child. A kind man and his wife gave me a loving home. He became my mentor and taught me the ancient art of Takht Kabaddi. The art of fighting with books, pens, and advanced acrobatics. Now, I use my powers for good, I stand for justice,

peace and education for all. I fight against the forces of tyranny and ignorance. Because I am ... Burka Avenger! (*Burka Avenger*)

The above words are taken from the title sequence of the *Burka Avenger* introducing the character of Jiya, who was tragically orphaned as a child and later adopted (Fig.1). Jiya is trained in the ancient art of Takt Kabaddi, the art of fighting with books, pens, and advanced acrobatics by her adopted father and mentor. Her appearance is emphasized by a series of scenes that depict Jiya disguised by a heavily stylized black burka flying through the air with great speed and ease, highlighting high-kicking leaps and karate-type arm movements (Fig. 2).



Fig.2. *The Burka Avenger*

Her transformation into the character of the Burka Avenger is synced with the show's theme song "The Lady in Black." A popular underground rapper in Pakistan, Adil Omar's, free flowing rhymes and pop lyrics are integrated into stop action fight sequences that litter the show, such as "Don't mess with the Lady in Black, the Lady in Black, when she's on the attack," echoing the Wachowskis 1999 American science fiction action film, *The Matrix*. The highly stylized version of the burka not only accentuates the minimalism of the garment and its ability to shield her identity from onlookers, but, simultaneously, is also transformative because with it Jiya becomes sleek, fast, and powerful (Fig. 3).

Revealing the show's narrative development, the title sequence not only exposes Jiya's transformation into the Burka Avenger but it also demonstrates her powers and duty to protect the children of Halwa-Pur. It is here that audiences encounter the first of many radically divergent representations of a woman clad by a burka with superhero powers. These initial images are significant as they are the first step in the construction of a new dynamic, a new way of thinking about the representation of veiled women and politics. The figure of the Burka Avenger counters hegemonic discourses that situate burka clad women as victims. Instead the TV show appropriates Orientalist narratives and repurposes them. The woman under this particular burka is sleek, courageous, and powerful. She not only defends children and the educational system but also the city's inhabitants. This move is not only significant in the repurposing of the garment, it also adds another level of investment in the figure of the heroine. Despite being temporary, Jiya's transformation into the Burka Avenger is significant because it moves her character away from ambiguity and reaffirms and repairs her identity.



Fig.3. Baba Bandoon and Vadeo Pajero Plotting to Close the School

As an animated production aimed at young children, the program also encounters cultural and political discourses that are used to represent women as voiceless and quietly shuffling around in their burkas (Abu-Lughod 784). Significantly, the tone of the story works with, and at the same time, breaks with social and political discourses that are associated with dominant representations of burkas in the West. A significant body of literature has been written on the

emergence of the narrative addressing how the representation of the Muslim Orient by the Christian Occident coincides with the Ottoman empires diminished power and the rise of European domination (Hoodfar 7).

Malek Alloula (1986) made the links between the Western vision of the Orient, as the other and the establishment of French colonial domination in the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) explicit. Alloula's reading of postcards of Algerian women that were produced and sent by the French in Algeria from the 1930s to the 1960s critiques the colonizers obsession with veiled women's bodies. Paying homage to Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida*, he reads the images as a wound (Harlow "Introduction" xiii). The colonial postcards Harlow argues in her Introduction to Alloula's text represent a desire that characterizes the West as bent on revealing phantasmatic sexuality of the harem as a dreamland in Orientalistic accounts (xiii). Like him, Mary Ann Fay (2012) analyzes the "harem as a trope that permitted unfavourable comparisons between the Orient and the West and validated their belief in the superiority of Western civilization" (24). Reading the symbolic power of Orientalistic discourses, she addresses the ahistorical perceptions of female seclusion, gender segregation, and veiling as detrimental to understanding women's socio and economic power historically (1). I treat Alloula and Fay as classic critiques of Orientalism that are, surprisingly and sadly, still valid today. When I look at burkas, I realize that we cannot pretend that the issue of veiling is under-explored, but in spite of the enormous body of literature that critiques the West's tendency towards "unveiling," Orientalist narratives are deeply engrained in the social and discursive production of identities tied to what Hoodfar deems "the making of the veil in western minds" (6).

When I study the burka, I see old Orientalist tales and immediate historical events collide and fuse as one story. In her 2004 study of Afghan women, Dana L. Cloud shows that the imagery cannot be dissociated from the US global war on terrorism. She argues that widely circulated images of Afghan women and men have been used to establish a series of binary oppositions between white, Western, modern subjects and abject foreign objects of surveillance and military action (Cloud 286). The reductionist marking of cultural "differences" through binary oppositions is key to unravelling the way in which meaning is made within both language and representation. For Cloud it is the positioning of the viewer as a paternalistic savior of Muslim women through the lens of oppositions such as self and other, backward and pre-modern, in need of rescue and saving that is tied to matters of representation that are crucial to the framing of these images:

these images construct the viewer as a paternalistic savior of women and posit images of modern civilizations against depictions of Afghanistan as backward and premodern. Through the construction of binary oppositions of self and Other, the evocation of a paternalistic stance toward the women of Afghanistan, and the figuration of a modernity as liberation, these images participate in justifications for the war that belie the actual motives for the war. The contradiction has a number of implications for democratic deliberation and public life during wartime. (Cloud 286-287)

Orientalistic tropes no longer serve to justify the intervention of colonial authorities. Unveiling will be achieved through a war that is justified to liberate women from a backward society and religion. But women are also somehow responsible for their fate to the extent that they are “both a cause and effect of the decline of Islamic civilization” (Fay 3). Like Cloud, Fay highlights the powerful sentiment that works with the image of the burka-clad woman as oppressed and passive and appropriates them putting a new spin on them in *The Burka Avenger*.

In contrast to these kinds of imaginings, the *Burka Avenger* provocatively situates this particular burka-clad figure as courageous and powerful in her battle against illiteracy and injustice. Through such a reading, a key element of the origin story derives its powers in its ability to reflect the specific fears and anxieties that are associated with the lives of women in Islam in the present day. Using key elements that have been taken from these discourses, the show’s creators work with the parameters of certain sociopolitical discourses as well as deploy others to offer a counter vision of women in Islam. This approach has been productive in its ability to respond to the reductive interpretation of veiling as the sign of women’s unfreedom (Abu-Lughod 786).

Memorably, the series has appropriated the iconic power of the burka from established discourses by creating a series of unconventional links between martial arts, women’s empowerment, and superheroes. Whilst the show acknowledges the burka’s centrality to dominant rhetoric’s regarding what a certain kind of Islamic fundamentalism looks like, it also offers a new valuation of the constant visual form of the burka as a progressive phenomenon that is provocative. The activity and agency of the ninja-like figure of Jiya as the Burka Avenger highlights the static burka-as-prison of the body idea and extends it. Breaking with the dominant discourses that surround imaginings of burka clad figures, the TV show not only works with the master narratives that underlie such representations but it also works to counter them. After more than a decade of exposure to these discourses, such imaginings have become everyday and are rarely if ever countered.

Fictionally intervening within these tropes allows for the larger geopolitical and cultural context in the Western popular media to be shifted, moving from what such fictions tell us

about the burka and the women who wear them, to what such representations tell us about the West. Rather than silencing such discourses, the TV show offers a way of re-envisioning the burka (and the women who wear them), which can only be measured in terms of the show's discursive and commercial powers. Thus the historical meanings embedded within the figure of the *Burka Avenger* function as narrative categories that allow viewers to differentiate between notions of hero and villain, victim and attacker, and right and wrong.

The program also offers a way of countering the series of dominant images that we have – that tell us about the experiences of women in visual and literary narratives. Narratives do more than produce or restrict, they also prevent us from thinking in other ways. As such, the TV show offers a series of sequences that tell us how we can shift the story and why they are important. The *Burka Avenger* serves as a means of contesting power between Western culture and the imagined lives of Muslim women (in Afghanistan and Pakistan); its value lies in its foregrounding of representational issues that have accompanied the growth of such imagery and its critical production. The program, not only embraces elements that stem from contemporary discourses on women and Islam, it also uses it as a departure point. Rather than silencing this story, it uses them as a productive way of addressing such discourses when talking about women's visibility and access to the public sphere.

Take for example the first episode, which as briefly discussed above, introduces the central character (Jiya as the *Burka Avenger*) and the plot line, but also entwines greater concerns about education, women, human rights, and veiling in the public sphere. The first episode opens with Jiya training with her father, Kabbadi Jan, on the roof of their home. Unable to concentrate on her drills, which test her agility and speed, she is overcome with fearful thoughts that the girls' school she works is at risks of being shut down by fundamentalists, represented by the character of Baba Bandook and his henchmen (Fig. 3). Shortly thereafter, Jiya's fears become realized when Bandook and Vadeo Pajero plot to shut down that very school. In a meeting on a quiet street to discuss their plans, Vadeo says:

That's good Baba Bandook. Those charity fools gave me money to run the girl's school. Who do they think I am? I am not going to waste good money on those worthless girls. The money will stay in my pocket. And don't you worry either. Once the school is shut down, you can have your share too. (*Burka Avenger*)

Baba Bandook responds:

Yes, Vadero Pajero, what business do women have with education? They should stay at home.

Washing, scrubbing and cleaning. Toiling in the kitchen. (Burka Avenger)

The excerpted dialogue between Bandook and Pajero refers to a number of different things. First, it addresses the role charities play in funding education in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Secondly, it highlights concerns about misogyny and the desire of some to prohibit the education of young girls and women. In this sequence, girls are framed as worthless and undeserving of education; they should be restricted to the home, and their time occupied by domestic chores (cleaning, cooking, etc.). This point is made more explicit in the next moments when Bandook orders the school to be closed, dramatically chaining the handles of the front doors together, securing them with an oversized padlock. He declares to the crowd of onlookers:

Run along now. This school has been shut down for good... Fools! If anyone tries to go inside I will just break their legs. Want to run a girl's school, do they? Do these girls want to be modern? What will girls do with education? (Burka Avenger)

Bravely, his monologue is interrupted by a young female student named Ashu:

Nooooo...! How can you shut down the school? We need education. It is our right. You cannot take away this right from us. We are the future of this country. The girls of today are the mothers of tomorrow. Let us shape our own future. What will you get out of ruining our lives? If mothers are not educated then the future generation will also remain illiterate. Don't push us into the darkness of illiteracy. Without education, we are all doomed. (Burka Avenger)

These excerpts are concerned with the politicization of gender in Pakistan and Afghanistan and prohibitions related to fundamentalism that seek to limit girls and women's education. Echoing the oppressive forces and contours related to orthodox Islamic gender discourse in Afghanistan, Pakistan's immediate neighbour on the west. During the Mullah regime of the Taliban, girls' schools and colleges were ordered shut, head-to-toe veiling became mandatory, women working in the public sphere were not only frowned upon, but restricted by that which was supposedly demanded by the *shariat*<sup>2</sup> put in place (Prakash 450). Here the show exemplifies anxieties related to Islamic fundamentalism and the war on terror. The villains are stereotypes

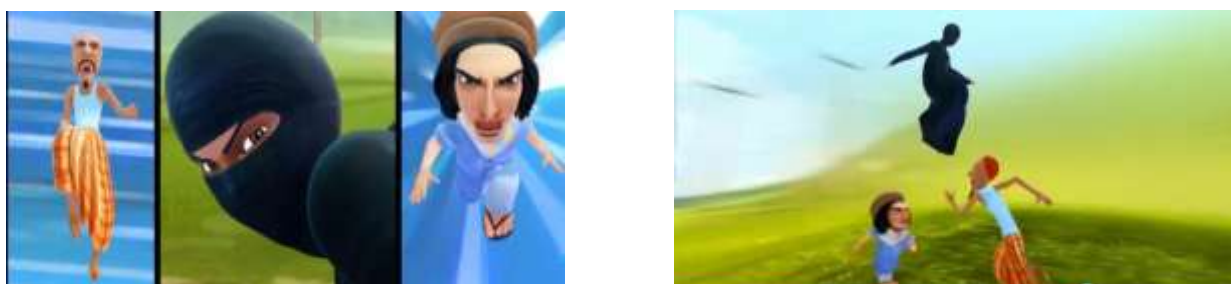
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<sup>2</sup>Canonical law based on the Qu'ran and the teachings of the Prophet based on the Hadith and Sunna.



who want to end girls' education, the symbol of liberalism. The fears and anxieties that emerge from religious fundamentalism are not unfounded but are used to propel the narrative forward.

Education is framed as that which not only promotes literacy but also is a modernizing force. Ashu pleads for her education declaring that it is a necessity not only for herself, but for her country, for the future of Pakistan. Met with a gruff response, the children are scared off. The crowd of children and women disperses to the delight of Bandoon and suddenly the Burka Avenger descends upon them and quickly defeats her four opponents with ease (Fig. 4).



Figs. 4 and 5. The Burka Avenger battles her opponents.

Choreographed fight scenes depict her flying through the air like a superhero, wielding books and pens as weapons, and manoeuvring over rooftops with great agility. The school is reopened, and a celebration ensues with an after school concert led by the singer Haroon, who praises their successes. From a distance, the antagonists are represented as angrily watching the concert and plotting against the Burka Avenger. The final scene features her protectively peering down over a crowd from the darkened roof of the school, echoing iconic scenes from the *Batman* franchise (a similar image can be found in Fig. 1). This excerpt illustrates not only the creation narrative that lies at the heart of the *Burka Avenger*, but it also addresses discourses on prohibitions against women and girls' education that recall imagery associated with religious Islamic fundamentalism in the Afghan-Pakistan border region.

Education is a key element that resonates in this episode that is literally and figuratively represented. Here, the program addresses concerns of justice and injustice tied to Muslim girls and women within the educational system. Viewers are made aware that there are still deep-rooted concerns that are tied to decrees against the education of girls and women. The program advocates that viewers fight back against injustice and gendered stereotypes to drive back the fundamentalists. Parallels between the political situation in the region and the show's narrative, reveal fears and anxieties tied to the burka and feature the fight for girls and women's rights to education and justice. Yet, this element is also productively countered in a number of different

ways. For example, viewers come face-to-face with representations of burka-clad figures that counter the dominant representations that are scattered all over the Western popular media. Jiya as the Burka Avenger is framed as strong, fast, and powerful, with superhero abilities that lets her battle the forces of evil. She not only battles the antagonists who are amassed in groups but she defeats them with relative ease (Fig. 5). The Burka Avenger is an anonymous figure who protects not only the children but also the city of Halwa-Pur, always alert, watching, and waiting for those who need her assistance.

As such, the figure of the Burka Avenger offers a series of compelling counter-images and narratives that work against the dominant discourses and the production of knowledge that we have about burka-clad subjects. Such images serve as a powerful counter-argument intervening with ideas of past and present that offer us as viewers a series of metaphors that speak to the visibility of the past and present, to aid in the reinforcement of a pre-existing narrative that situates the burka as an empowering object, one that helps our heroine fight against injustice. This is not represented in one particular moment, but rather is present through a series of visual and literary narratives that work to develop the idea as a story, a narrative of past and present.

These kinds of imaginings emerge in part from a lengthy historical genealogy. To a certain degree they reflect Orientalism as a historical discourse that spans the past two hundred to three hundred years (Kahf 177). As a term, Orientalism is used to speak about the “discourse that codifies knowledge about the Orient from a position of Western cultural hegemony and material dominance over that world” (Kahf 177). Orientalist tropes, to paraphrase Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), label Islam as “uncivilized,” barbaric,” and “terrorists”. Muslim women, particularly media images of burka-clad women have become marked as “trademarks of Islam’s repression” (Zine 2). These images have been used to justify military action, in its many shapes under the trope of liberation as was the earlier formula for intervention and control in the Muslim world by colonial powers (Zine 2).

Homi Bhabha (1994) in his readings of colonial stereotypes which he describes in terms of their fetishistic nature offers a way of envisioning the memorable qualities of a stereotype. Bhabha writes:

Likewise the stereotype, which is a major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always in place, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated...as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved. (94-95)

This excerpt highlights how stereotypes are forms of knowledge, those that are not simply already known but also that they are anxiously repeated (95). In *Declining the Stereotype* (1998) Mireille Rosello expands on Bhabha's definition and adds another layer to it, she explains:

An ethnic stereotype is a form of contamination it is a strong element of iterativity that insinuates itself like some sort of bacteria to a general statement about a group or a community. The stereotypical infection then turns this non-demonstratable statement into an instantly memorable formula that parades as common sense, truth, and wisdom. In the next stage, the ideological content, the supposedly descriptive element of the stereotypes- that is, what the stereotype says about a certain racial or ethnic group – then appears to be the stereotype itself. (37)

Even though we cannot prove the stereotype, it does function abstractly, we can conceptualize it through its intensity and repeatability. Returning to *the Burka Avenger* the dominant forms of representation that emerge from the narrative and imagery are marked by their appropriation. They work to counter the ideas of victimization, general statements about groups of people, and importantly what this reveals about its use. Returning to both Bhabha and Rosello what is significant for the survival of the stereotype is the power of its iterativity.

## Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the figure of the Burka Avenger works to counter hegemonic imaginings of women in burkas that dominate popular discourses in the West, Europe and North America. The forms of representation that run throughout the TV show not only repurpose the burka for viewers, but it also successfully intervenes with Orientalist narratives that offer essentialized representations of burka-clad women that are situated in hegemonic discourses as silent, passive, and without agency. Represented as a superheroine of sorts, the Burka Avenger protects children and their right to education as well as protects the city from those who seek to limit the public sphere, seeking to restrict/limit women and girls from public spaces. Offering a powerful counter-image of burka-clad figures as those who do the defending and fighting, the TV show breaks with simply binary forms of identification such as dominant-submissive, modern-traditional, and secular-religious. Its images and narratives serve as a conceptual space where viewers can confront their collective fears and anxieties when encountering visually loaded symbols of Islamic iconoclasm. By retooling the burka as a

powerful cultural icon, the *Burka Avenger* has effectively offered a series of counter images that intervene with hegemonic representations (stereotypes) that situate the burka as an icon of women's oppression.

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