

NON-WESTERN ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADIGM SHIFTS: POSTHUMAN FEMINIST DISCOURSE OF THE PAKISTANI TV ANIMATION SERIES *BURKA AVENGER* (2013–2016)

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ABSTRACT

“Posthumanism” denotes an increasing focus on women, the environment, machines, and animal-centered discourses instead of male-dominated narratives. The posthuman feminist field of research is one of the many emergent thematic discourses of existent posthumanisms. Posthuman feminist notions have almost always been the subject of discussion in Western academia. However, we intend to analyze the posthuman feminist discourse of a Pakistani technically mediated female subjectivity, an animated female superheroine—Burka Avenger—in order to initiate discussion on non-Western posthuman feminism. By analyzing the historical genealogy of Pakistani feminist activism, we establish that *Burka Avenger* contributes to two major discourses of Pakistani feminist struggle, the right to education and veiling debates. Through our analysis of the animated female subjectivity presented in this series, we contend that the protagonist is a Pakistani posthuman feminist figure because she challenges the established mental habits of Pakistani feminist struggle and prefigures an onto-epistemological shift.

KEYWORDS

Pakistan, non-Western posthuman feminism, animation, Burka Avenger, veil, female education

Posthumanism is an emerging field of inquiry into the nature of human and nonhuman relationships and their implications for the future of *Homo sapiens*. It is an all-inclusive term that incorporates the heterogeneous discourses of

environmental justice, racial equality, and women's rights, and the list is actually nonexhaustive. One of the most substantial subcategories in this broad field is possible future transformations in human bodies and civilizations as a result of the growing influence of technology. Accordingly, one of the many strands of posthuman studies deals with the impact of technology on women's rights activism and feminist ideologies. Posthuman feminism is, no doubt, a diverse and multidimensional field of scholarly research, but there are no significant works that reflect upon the characteristics and dynamics of posthuman feminisms in non-Western contexts, as posthuman feminism is dominated by Western academia (Short 2005, 6; Jackson 2019, xii). Therefore, it is necessary to find ways to express the non-Western dimension of posthuman feminism to enrich the field. In this posthuman feminist research paper, we analyze the role of technological advancement in the promotion of women's rights through a Pakistani animated series, *Burka Avenger* (Rashid and Khan 2013–2016), created by Haroon Rashid. We argue in this paper that this Pakistani animated series has created graphically designed characters who initiate Pakistani posthuman feminist discourse.

Before delving into this in-depth posthuman feminist discourse analysis, it is necessary to reiterate the contours of posthuman theory, the concept of posthuman feminism, and its differences from mainstream feminism. Moreover, it is also important to ponder the similarities and differences between Western and non-Western posthuman feminist discourses and their implications for underdeveloped regions such as Pakistan. It is imperative to take a long detour before finally reaching the analysis of *Burka Avenger*, because non-Western posthuman feminism is not yet a well-established domain of study. So we will first of all try to map out the trajectory of non-Western posthuman feminism before conducting a hermeneutic analysis of this animated program.

Western academia traces the genealogy of posthumanism from the “death of man” heralded by Foucault (Wolfe 2010, xx; Braidotti 2013, 18; Herbrechter 2013, 13) and the consequent death of the popular Western humanism that relies on the ideal figure of an able-bodied, morally and ethically perfect Western male figure. This death of man gave rise to anti-humanist (anti-white-man) philosophies such as feminism, postcolonialism, and racial and cultural studies. Many authors have contributed to the ideology of posthumanism. Some perceive it as a major scholarly force influencing our culture that impinges upon “research agendas, economic developments, social policies, philosophical theories, and ultimately the way we look at ourselves and our world” (Hauskeller, Philbeck, and Carbonell 2016, 6), which aims to dismantle the central position of the male human figure (Braidotti 2013). It diverts the attention of inquiry toward man's human and nonhuman companions—the environment, animals, machines, and

females—that have always been in the background of man-centered discourses. This ontological shift has also given a new direction to the global feminist cause. Virtual, cinematic, and technologically mediated female subjectivities are providing a new kind of force to the feminist scholarly narrative. Especially, media productions of female bodies and figures have provided valuable sources for reflection on the posthuman turn in feminist studies. Similarly, Ferrando argues in her book *Philosophical Posthumanism* that this paradigm shift “may refer to the symbolic move of going beyond the human, embracing a post-anthropocentric approach which acknowledges technology and the environment, among others, as defining aspects of the human” (Ferrando 2019, 27). Moreover, the field of critical posthumanism focuses on the repercussions of interrelation between human and non-human (Braidotti 2013, 45; Herbrechter 2013; Nayar 2014, 8). Another group of posthuman theorists believe that being a posthuman does not necessarily mean that human beings have become obsolete or evolved/devolved into something beyond human. It just promotes “re-distributions of difference and identity” between human and nonhuman and highlights the “resonance” and “interference” between various species, races, ethnicities, sexual identities, and genders (Halberstam and Livingston 1995, 10). The prefix “post” in the term “posthumanism” does not signal any kind of closure, but it rather empowers and enriches this field. This field initiates a “counter-intuitive movement away from the conventional comfort zones of cultural critique and human-centered research at large” (Åsberg and Braidotti 2018, 11). Overall, the entire narrative of posthumanist discourse has multiple dissenting and assenting voices that shape and further the contours of this theoretical perspective. We would like to quote Cary Wolfe’s definition of the term “posthuman,” which succinctly sums up main debates around posthumanism:

a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrusts them on us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon. (Wolfe 2010, xv–xvi)

Posthuman feminism, a subcategory of posthumanism, has been discussed in Western feminist academia for a while now. Multiple discourses such as the hurdles in the lives of women, their potential abilities, and the possible mechanisms by which to struggle for women’s political, social, and civic rights have contributed to the theoretical narrative of feminism (Hawkesworth and Disch

2016, 2). The trajectory of posthuman feminism has been drawn from feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), Simone de Beauvoir (1972), Alison Jaggar (1983), and Luce Irigaray (1985), who transcribed the violation of the individual and public rights of females on the basis of their biology. Thus, feminism, in both Western and non-Western countries, has almost always been dominated by white female liberation efforts. In the same way, posthuman feminism has also overwhelmingly been a domain of Western theorists. Åsberg and Braidotti (2018) believe that “the fields of feminist posthumanities draw on multiple sources of thought, creative practice, art, science, and various minoritarian areas of study” (2), which are inclusive and nonreductive, and there is no need to give a tightly knit boundary for this concept. Moreover, feminist posthumanities make the contemporary humanities “integrative, transformative and relevant,” which works through “various subsets of material-semiotics and decolonizing moves—such as new materialisms, feminist science studies, and various ontological turns to ethics” (Åsberg and Braidotti 2018, 15). Feminist scholars also bring together “accounts of the gendered effects of new technologies on embodiment, subjectivity, and collectivity” (Lynes and Symes 2016, 129). Hence, posthuman feminism is a diverse and multidimensional field of scholarly research. In this sense, posthuman feminist theory derives its roots from classical feminist ideology and philosophy. But it is an extension of feminism and an approach to analyzing and reflecting upon an increasingly technology-dependent world. Since posthuman theory is meant to analyze and critically evaluate the impact of technology on our overall lives, the posthuman feminist lens provides us with a chance to critically analyze the impact of technology on the roles, rights, and subjectivities of women.

The genealogy of Western posthumanism is traced back to Foucault, whereas the posthuman genealogy within postcolonial nations like Pakistan emerged from postcolonial theories—most importantly those of Said (2006) and Fanon (1963). Similarly, the posthuman feminist trajectory can be traced from Spivak’s seminal text “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (2006), which raises the issues of postcolonial women.

Feminism of the underdeveloped countries has mostly been dominated by oriental ideologies. Some of these Western notions about non-Western women have been challenged by postcolonial theorists such as Spivak (2006), Mohanty (1991), and Abu-Lughod (2013). One of the most popular Western oriental fantasies is that white men are saviors of oppressed brown women, who are taken as doubly colonized figures (Spivak 2006). Similarly, Mohanty (1991) criticizes the white feminists’ agenda, which focuses on saving brown women who are “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized” (56). The premises discussed by Mohanty later

inspired Abu-Lughod (2013) to challenge the post-9/11 discourses about the victimization of Muslim women at the hand of their men. Hence, the feminist agenda of women of color first needs to be liberated from the discriminating discourses of the West, which portray them as victimized beings. There is a need to carve authentic feminist cartographies of feminist movements which are not inspired by Western influence but are firmly based in local cultures, societies, and ideologies.

Pakistan has its unique history of feminist struggle, which started taking shape in the colonial era and tried to reestablish itself in the postcolonial milieu. It has its own distinctive activism trajectories of women's right to education, personal freedom, veiling, freedom of expression, presence in public space, political representation, and legislation related to the protection of women. Since pre-Partition times, feminism in the subcontinent has faced controversies related to the rights of education and issues of veiling. Rubina Saigol, an eminent Pakistani feminist researcher, asserts that "Pakistan also inherited many social issues—such as polygamy, purdah, child marriage, inheritance, divorce and the right to education—from the pre-Partition times" (Saigol 2019).

The making of Pakistan's feminist activism can be traced from its colonial history. The seeds of it were sown in the colonial era when Muslim women's right to education was recognized between 1886 and 1917 (Saigol 2016, 5). Previously, Indian Muslim women were not allowed to go to educational institutions because it was believed that British education is not appropriate for women and because these women should remain in veils and going to educational institutions might jeopardize their Muslim feminine modesty. Only elitist women were allowed to get education, who later on led the women's education rights movement and were prominent in political participation in the colonial era (Khan 1999, 44–45; Saigol 2016, 8). Gradually, Muslim females' right to education was acknowledged and women started getting education in an environment where veiling was observed (Khan 1999, 40). Women participated actively in the independence movement of Pakistan, but then in the postcolonial milieu, they were only accepted in the role of Girl Guides (Saigol 2016, 7), who could be useful only in "nurturing" (Saigol 2016, 9) or household tasks. Some women's rights organizations were founded, but they always remained confused between secular (bad feminism) and religious feminisms (good feminism) in Pakistan (Chaudhary 2018). Moreover, political parties, dictators, religious extremists, and NGOs also misused the feminist ontology to achieve their own political ends (Saigol 2016, 40; Shaheed 2019, 159), just as throughout South Asian (Loomba and Lukose 2012, 1–2; Roy 2012, 2) and global feminist movements (Zia 2009, 29). The historical evidence mentioned above predicates that women, in the pre-Partition subcontinent, were brought to educational

institutions to prepare them as a force to fight against colonial rulers, and once independence was achieved, they were asked to go back home and take care of domestic chores. In the post-Independence era, women's rights were no one's priority. It was only after 1948 that First Lady Begum Ra'ana Liaqat Ali Khan organized some rehabilitation and activist organizations for women's welfare and their legal rights (Saigol 2016, 19). Perhaps the worst setback to Pakistani feminism was the era of Zia ul Haq (1978–1988), when Muslim women were forced to cover their heads with the dupatta (veil) everywhere in public space, even on TV screens (Saigol 2016, 15). Laws such as the Hudood Ordinance was passed by Zia's regime, which further limited women's right to report rape and get the perpetrator convicted (as the law demanded four eyewitnesses of the rape, and if a woman could not provide them, she was punished for fornication according to the Sharia law). In this era, feminists became active again because of extreme violation of women's rights. Women staged protests through poetry, painting, dance, theatre, film, and TV dramas during Zia's regime. So there has been a tradition of feminist struggle in Pakistan through art. *Burka Avenger* is a continuation of this feminist struggle in animated form contextualized in the post-9/11 milieu.

As far as female political participation in present-day Pakistan is concerned, women have gotten political representation, but the seats that are reserved for women are only given to female relatives of political figures or are given on a favoritism and nepotism basis (Batoool 2019). Many women's protection bills have been passed (Noreen and Musarrat 2013; Zia 2014; *Dawn* 2018), but they lack proper implementation, follow-up, research, and strong convictions required for the protection of women (IPS Task Force 2011, 97; Noreen and Musarrat 2013, 119; Ahmed 2014, 1; Muneer 2018). Recently, on March 4, 2019, a huge feminist rally was organized in all major cities of Pakistan, called the Aurat March (Mohyidin 2019; Price 2019; Saleem 2019; Toppa 2019). It was criticized for being outrageous because of explicitly sexual and immoral content written on the placards the marchers were holding (Azeem 2019; Zahra-Malik 2019). Many Pakistani feminist activists also dismissed this convention because of its incompatibility with Pakistan's cultural and religious values (Azeem 2019; Zahra-Malik 2019). This event not only raised a voice for women's rights but also highlighted major human and environmental issues. The problem with the Pakistani feminist movement is that it has never been a cohesive force able to put up a fight for its rights, but always remained scattered in various pockets (Zia 2009, 29; Saigol 2016, 38). As a result, Pakistan is ranked 164th on the Women, Peace, and Security Index 2019–2020 (2019, 63). This displays a huge failure on the part of the Pakistani feminist and human rights struggle. To sum up the entire discussion, we would like to quote Zuneera Shah, a student of

government and gender studies at Harvard University, who succinctly sums up the Pakistani feminist struggle scenario in these words: “Women are always resisting against patriarchal forces in their own ways: sometimes subtle, at times overt. For a lot of Pakistani women, mere survival is resistance” (Shah 2019). In this context, Pakistani feminism is only about survival, in contrast to rich and very active Western feminist academia. Some possible posthuman forms of struggle in this scenario are online activism (Rehman 2017) and animation shows such as *Burka Avenger*, which is the topic of discussion here.

The scholarly work available in the field of posthuman feminism presents a predominantly Western notion of posthuman feminism. A non-Western posthuman feminist perspective is missing from scholarly debates. Therefore, it is necessary to include new dimensions in the mainstream posthuman feminist discourse of the Western intelligentsia. We need a new paradigm for non-Western posthuman feminism because the concepts of equal rights for women, technological assistance in reproduction, radical cosmetic surgeries, and female robotics are not very familiar concepts for a non-Western woman who is still struggling for basic rights such as education, physical and emotional security, freedom of expression, and freedom of choice. There is no considerable research that reflects on the characteristics and dynamics of posthuman feminisms in non-Western contexts such as Pakistan. Along with Western posthuman feminist inquiries, it is crucial to study non-Western paradigms of posthuman feminism(s). It is also imperative to reflect upon the role and modes of technologies that are affecting non-Western feminism(s) to develop a cohesive and all-inclusive scenario of the role of technology in the feminist cause. We contend that one of the few baby steps toward theorizing non-Western posthuman feminism is a 3D animated female figure in *Burka Avenger* that heralds freedom from dependence on human figures and resorts to a graphically created animated figure to initiate posthuman feminist discourse in a non-Western world.

Burka Avenger deals with pertinent contemporary issues such as empowerment of women, animal rights, and environmental rights. The characters of this series are placed in the imaginary city of Halwapur (somewhere in Pakistan). The main protagonist of the series, Jiya, is a teacher by profession and fights corrupt villains in the disguise of Burka Avenger. She uses the fictional martial art technique of Takht Kabadī, in which pens and books are used as projectile weapons. The series was acclaimed for its feminist political struggle by both Pakistani (Shaikh 2013) and international intelligentsia (Kapur 2013; Khazan 2013; Krista 2013; Bhalla 2015). The avatar of Burka Avenger received positive reviews in comparisons with Western superheroine figures and Disney characters (Ehrlich 2013; Rosenberg 2013; Davis 2017). However, Pakistani liberal feminists criticized the burka costume of the female protagonist as a continuation of the

stereotyping of Pakistani women as veiled figures (NDTV 2013; Rehman 2017; Shah 2019). Nevertheless, this study considers this animation series as a posthuman site of feminist contestation and discursive (re)production of gender power relations in Pakistani milieu. One of the many possible ways that technology is causing onto-epistemological paradigm shifts in developing countries like Pakistan is through technologically mediated animation series such as *Burka Avenger*. It traverses Pakistani feminist activism related to women's right to education and the debates around the issues of veiling. Animation technology is our frame of reference to initiate a non-Western trajectory of posthuman feminist discourse analysis.

This empowered and educated Muslim Pakistani Burka-clad posthuman superheroine also merits research consideration because she heralds a positive digital female identity transformation in the mediascapes of Pakistan. *Burka Avenger* projects an optimistic version of Pakistan where women are empowered with education and they dynamically resist the sociocultural discursive formations of injustice. Therefore, we argue that the digitally mediated female-centered portrayal in *Burka Avenger* foreshadows a posthuman feminist onto-epistemological shift in Pakistan. It is imperative to analyze the impact of new technologies on social relations of power as they are potentially more relevant to future generations (Terranova 2004; Carbonell 2015). This research has the potential to yield and initiate non-Western posthuman feminist debates because we assume that digital portrayals are more relevant and sustainable appropriation of feminist narratives for our contemporary world and future generations as they "imagine... individuations" (Carbonell 2015, 154). Hence, it is crucial to explore how this animated series might structure a possibility of historical transformation in contemporary Pakistan. For the analysis of this series, a posthuman feminist theoretical framework prompts more tenable, tolerant, and globally relevant paradigms for non-Western female empowerment issues.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANIMATION, POSTHUMANISM, AND *BURKA AVENGER*

This article perceives the female identity created in *Burka Avenger* as posthuman because its subjectivity is produced through dynamic interfaces with computers. The series projects a world envisioned by feminists and posthumanist female rights activists where the female is the center of the techno-utopian universe (Firestone 1970; Haraway 1985; Hayles 2008; Braidotti 2016). It is a posthuman TV show, first, because the entire series and its characters have been created with 3D computer graphics, which involves the use of both hardware and software

(Sito 2013, 2–5) and, second, because of its content related to the environment, women, animals, children, racial, and ethnic equality.

We argue that animated human images with 3D animations are posthuman bodies because they are “bodies without organs” (Deleuze and Guittari 1987, 154; Hayles 1999, 4). *Posthuman Bodies*, a collection of essays edited by Halberstam and Livingstone (1995), theorizes various material and discursive characteristics that refigure the female posthuman body, which is especially relevant here. We assert that the subjectivities of *Burka Avenger* and her fellow characters are posthuman because they have been created by technology, as Halberstam and Livingstone (1995) argue that a posthuman body can be “a technology, a screen, a projected image” (3), even “a body under the sign of AIDS, a contaminated body, a deadly body, a techno-body” (3). These are posthuman bodies because they are projected images on a screen created with the help of technology. Furthermore, Hauskeller, Philbeck, and Carbonell (2016) also argue that because screened subjectivities transform concepts into animated figures, in many cinematic performances, “we find literally the image of the human transformed into images of the posthuman” (4). Therefore, animated human figures can also be perceived as posthuman bodies because they have been created with computer interfaces and projected on screens.

The art of creating animation programs is in itself a posthuman act. The technique of animation is complicated and most of its definitions are limited in scope (Wells and Hardstaff 2008, 6; Dobson 2009, xxxvi; Manovich 2011, 5). Manovich’s definition succinctly summarizes animation as “live action material + painting + image-processing + compositing + 2D computer animation + 3D computer animation” (Wells and Hardstaff 2008, 6). There has been great progress in the modeling and animation of human figures in computer graphics since the 1980s (Grosso, Quach, and Badler 1989, 83; Dobson 2009, xl). Contemporary animation is an art form in which animated figures are created with computer graphics, called “cel animation” (Dobson 2009, xl). So there are layers of human and computer interactions in the art of animation (Manovich 2011, 9–13). In this sense, animation is an art form that is created with human and computer art forms combined together, thus, posthuman.

The subjectivities that are created through animation are also posthuman in their very essence. To create the animated figures on screen, an ancient technique of human body measurements for sculpting, anthropometry, is used. Later, these human figures’ measurements are fed into computers and then graphics are added to these measurements to create multiple movements for the animation narratives (Grosso, Quach, and Badler 1989, 83). In *Burka Avenger*, human models (actors) have also been used to create digital avatars. In this sense, they are made in the image of their real human models, which

makes them posthuman. These animated figures are not human but are created in the image of their human counterparts. Once the graphic design is complete, the actors then do voiceover for the animated figures. Going through all these processes of symbiosis between computer graphics, human voiceover, and anthropometry makes animated characters more akin to technologically mediated figures—who are ready to replace human bodies and depict posthuman subjectivities on screens.

Animated media productions such as *Burka Avenger* are essential to ponder in posthuman milieu because they depict the media's crucial role in contemporary politics. In fact, the media have become an integral part of the contemporary world because "media productions offer a precious tool for reflecting on society" (Ferrando 2015, 277). Ferrando (2015) argues that a "[R]ich field of investigation lies in animation" (274), as it is technologically mediated subjectivities and is consequential because it challenges social norms and provides an impetus for "philosophical discussion" (Toffoletti 2007, 3). Actually, "[t]echnology and human integration consequently re-writes and re-casts what being human entails" (Toffoletti 2007, 6). Moreover, media "exteriorize human experience in durable, repeatable and transmissible forms" (Hansen 2004, 359) and depict our posthuman condition, which is produced with the twin layers of culture and computer (Manovich 2001, 46). Therefore, female subjectivities and feminist politics are two main trajectories in which animation media provide valuable insights.

BURKA AVENGER—A NON-WESTERN POSTHUMAN FEMINIST SITE OF STRUGGLE

This series is a posthuman feminist struggle site because it does not undertake only feminist causes, but in this program the superheroine has also been shown fighting against the violation of minority rights, animal rights, environmental rights, and children's rights, to name a few. It is a posthuman Pakistani feminist site because

feminist posthumanities engages with critical and creative pursuits that address changing relations between political animals of a more-than-human kind, bodies, technologies and environments, and it does so from interdisciplinary and post-conventional perspectives. (Åsberg 2018, 157)

It foregrounds a postdualistic world where *Burka Avenger* fights equally for human, environmental, technological, gender, and racial rights without any discrimination. She is depicted as a superheroine in this program, and the superhero narrative genre is a potential site that "produces subjectivities that

negotiate our posthuman world” (Hassler-Forest 2015, 69). This is not only a feminist struggle but also a multidimensional struggle through an unconventional vigilante fighting for multiple causes beyond any binary identities such as male/female, man/machine, or man/environment. This program configures a postanthropocentric utopian universe in Pakistani mediascapes that intends to bring about a paradigm shift in the larger society. Braidotti (2013; 2016) argues that posthuman feminism is “not a new generic category but rather a navigational tool that can assist us in coming to terms with the complexities of our times” (Braidotti 2017, 40). *Burka Avenger* also unpacks the complexity of society and the feminist movement that navigates Pakistani philosophies and issues related to feminism. Braidotti also believes that since the field of posthuman feminism is very “rich” and “complex,” it is sagacious to “work toward multiple transversal alliances across communities: many re-compositions of the human and new ways of becoming” (Braidotti 2017, 41). Taking a cue from Braidotti here, we argue that animation is a new way of becoming the posthuman feminist domain. *Burka Avenger* is an “onto-epistemological shift in the feminist theory of subjectivity” (Braidotti 2016, 683) in Pakistan with the “inclusion of nonhuman agents in the constitution of subjects of knowledge and politics” (Braidotti 2016, 685). Nonhuman animated female subjectivity has been used in *Burka Avenger* to reconfigure and extend female politics and knowledge in Pakistani contexts. Two major concerns of the Pakistani women’s rights struggle have always been the right to education and the issue of veiling (Saigol 2019), as discussed earlier. This series explores both these concerns and develops a posthuman feminist version of a utopian city, Halwapur, where a woman fights with pens and notebooks against perpetrators of crimes against humans, animals, plants, races, and women. This paper will now elaborate that how this series extend Pakistani feminism’s concerns about female education and the controversy of veiling in Pakistan.

PROPAGATION OF WOMEN’S RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The first crucial feminist issue raised in this show is that of a woman’s right to education—a struggle since colonial times. Women gained the right to education after a lot of effort in pre-Independence Pakistan (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987; Saigol 2016). The situation of women education in Pakistan is still not very good (Human Rights Watch 2018). Many girls are out of school and are not given their basic right to education. Currently, around 22.8 million children are out of school in Pakistan due to poverty—12.2 million girls and 10.6 million boys (Jamil 2019, 21). In the post-9/11 era, amid many fundamentalist and extremist elements

that infiltrated Pakistan, girls' education once again received the limelight after a teenager, Malala Yousufzai, was attacked by extremists for her pro-education activism (Yousufzai 2014). *Burka Avenger* is actually a continuation of that long struggle for Pakistani women's right to education. The very first episode of the season, which is titled *Girls' School Shut Down*, especially promotes the agenda of women's equal rights. In this episode, Vadero Pajero makes a scheme to shut down a girls' school in order to save money. He hires Baba Bandoq to close the girls' school. When they are planning to lock the school, they utter a number of common patriarchal notions about women's education. Baba Bandoq says, "What have women got to do with education; they should stay at home" to wash, clean, scrub, and toil in the kitchen. Similarly, Vadero Pajero agrees with him and reiterates, "No matter how much girls study, in the end, they have to make rotis (flat bread) in the kitchen." The graphically produced characters, who explicitly narrate anti-feminist philosophies and reiterate the stereotypical roles of females, have been portrayed as villains whom everyone should hate. In contrast, Ashu, a heroic and feminist graphically designed character, makes an emotional speech on girls' right to education and supports feminist ideologies of equality. Later on, *Burka Avenger* beats up Baba Bandoq and his goons and makes them stay away from the girls' school. This first episode firmly establishes Pakistani posthumanist feminist concerns such as women's educational rights in *Burka Avenger*.

Moreover, the fighting technique (*Takht Kadadi*) of *Burka Avenger*, the art of combating with pens and books, is a symbolic representation of women's struggle for the right to education in Pakistan. The name of this martial technique, *Takht Kabadi*, signifies the possibility of women's transformation and empowerment through education, as women's education has always been perceived as synonymous with their empowerment and better position in underdeveloped societies (Murphy-Graham and Lloyd 2015, 556; Porter 2016, 517). The Urdu word "*Takht*" here means "writing board" and is a symbol of education. "*Kabadi*" here refers to a popular regional game in which two teams of seven players are in competition and the aim is to cross a line drawn between two teams and tag out the team members of the opponent team (Sen 2015, 219; Chandhok 2016; Sengupta 2017). Here the art of fighting has been named after a sport in which the players have to cross boundaries. Thus, *Burka Avenger* crosses boundaries of gender with her education and symbolic/fighting technique of combating with pens and books. Jiya/*Burka Avenger*'s fight with the injustice around her is a utopian vision and prophesies a future where women can stand as a powerful force not only against anti-feminist forces but also for the support of minorities, the environment, and other species around them but only if they are educated. Hence, this posthuman boundary rider furthers the vision of the importance

of women's education in non-Western contexts such as Pakistan for women's welfare and the betterment of the larger society.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE VEILING DEBATE IN NON-WESTERN POSTHUMAN FEMINIST STRUGGLE

The second major debate that this program illustrates is the issue of veiling in Pakistani feminism. Veiling has been considered as a hindrance to the provision of women's rights to Muslim women. Since pre-Independence times, the veil has been used and misused for political and religious hegemonic forces (Saigol 2016, 4–5). Since 9/11, the veil has become an international controversy in which various European countries have banned the veil and taken away Muslim women's rights to cover themselves. This series was criticized for promoting stereotypical subjugated female identities but, in fact, it shows two sides of the same coin. Jiya has been depicted as a teacher who is always attired in a traditional Pakistani shalwar qameez and dupatta in all public situations, such as home and her workplace. She only wears a burka when she has to hide her identity in order to anonymously fight people who are working against human and environmental protection.

The costume of *Burka Avenger* created a controversy among Pakistani intelligentsia, who argued that it is a stereotypical costume used to promote the subjugation of the female figure (NDTV 2013). However, the character of Jiya when she wears a Burka can never be identified as someone who is either subjugated or powerless. The burka is a full body shroud (mostly in black) worn by some Muslim women to cover their bodies for religious reasons. In Pakistan, like many Muslim countries, some Muslim women wear the burka (either by choice or by force). One of the most important reasons that Jiya's character is very relevant to contemporary posthuman feminist debates is also her veil. This costume raised controversy because some liberal feminists considered the burka as a continuation of female subjugation (NDTV 2013); however, others considered it appropriate for a Muslim super-heroine (Kapur 2013; Krista 2013). The burka has always been negatively associated with the mystery related to oriental females (Said 2006, 21), on one hand, and their patriarchal subjugation, on the other (Raheja and Gold 1994, 33; Ghosh 2008, 1). Since 9/11, the burka has become a topic of heated debates and controversies in the global political scene (Mahmood 2005; McLarney 2009, 2; *Economic and Political Weekly* 2010, 9; Moors 2012, 295). The majority of European countries banned religious symbolic tokens such as burkas/hijabs/veils worn by Muslim women (Bruckner 2010; Kabir 2010; Kumar 2010, 4; Hunter-Henin 2012, 38; Joppke

and Torpey 2013; Dorlin 2017). Policy-makers considered the act of banning burkas an essential step in countering extremist and fundamentalist ideologies, which were expected to worsen after 9/11 (Kadri 2007, 36; Scott 2010, 3). Therefore, since 9/11, they are not only a costume; they are a discourse of patriarchal oppression on the one hand, and Western coercion on the other (Larzeg 2007, 6-11). This animation show is a post-burka-controversy inversion of the costume into a metaphor of mysterious power, which allows Jiya to defy both Pakistani patriarchy and Western oppression.

Interpreting the symbol of burka is not as simple as it seems in the post-9/11 milieu where burka is only associated with repression of Muslim women. *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, edited by Jennifer Heath (2008), gives a very diverse and rich account of instances where the burka is appropriated by modern Muslim women as a fashionable garment, worn by both men and women from various religious traditions, used for veiling divine entities since ancient traditions and used by many religious traditions from the beginning of human civilization till contemporary times. The burka is not only a symbol of repression, as it has been interpreted most of the times since 9/11. Heath (2008) asserts that the veil signifies

Simulacrum and concealment, protection and belligerence, nature and antinature, lament and celebration, men and women—these and other alliances of symbol and actuality constitute a complex labyrinth of the meanings of masks and veils... The veil, in contrast, can be about imperceptibility and can be used to render the wearer, or the audience, invisible. Nevertheless, the veil—as modern geopolitics shows—is also its own theater. (Heath 2008, 102–3)

Similarly, Fadqa El Guindi, in her book *Veil—Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*, asserts that “veil is a complex symbol of many meanings. Emancipation can be expressed by wearing the veil or by removing it. It can be secular or religious. It can represent tradition or resistance” (El Guindi 1999, 172). In *Burka Avenger*, the veil has been used as a mysterious shroud to veil a hidden power, it suggests emancipation of women within the veil, it is neither secular nor religious, it is just a symbol of feminist struggle and emancipation in contemporary Pakistani feminist scenario. It cannot be separated from the South Asian Muslim female veiling tradition, but it clearly is an emblem of much more than just a religious or regional tradition. It foregrounds empowerment, emancipation, and resistance of the Pakistani feminist movement in the age of electronic media.

Burka Avenger’s costume of burka/veil needs to be interpreted in “post-dualistic” terms (Ferrando 2019, 3), because in order to fully understand its

significance, it is necessary to undertake both male and female practices of veiling. There is ethnographic evidence that suggests veiling practices among males “in the pre-Islamic and post-Islamic Arab East” and in the Tuareg tribe, where men wear masks as a sign of maturity (Heath 2008, 110). There is a long tradition of male veiling customs as well, in which male veiling can also be masks that men wear to hide their identities (El Guindi 1999, 4; Heath 2008, 110). These veils/masks allow them to hide themselves for resistance as well as for the sake of identification of their social power (Heath 2008, 6). Therefore, in posthuman and postdualistic contexts, the phenomenon of veiling must “include veiling behavior by both sexes” (El Guindi 1999, 4). The veil has an ancient history of association with divine, mysterious, and hidden powers, as many ancient goddesses were covered in veils, and in myth and folklore, powerful supernatural characters often appear in veils (Heath 1999, 6–8). In this sense, for *Burka Avenger*, “The veil is itself mystery, even as it is also the shroud that guards the mystery. To be veiled is, to some degree, to be hidden” (Heath 2008, 6). The costume of the burka, in fact, has been used as a mysterious power position that both empowers and defends Jiya in her fight against oppression.

The veil is actually an in-between position that is used as a symbol of empowerment rather than subjugation. The burka, along with the technique of *Takht Kabadi*, allows Jiya to cross boundaries. In addition, the burka is a window that lets the “subaltern” (Jiya/*Burka Avenger*) speak and fight for her rights (Spivak 2006, 28). Not only does it give her space to voice her preferences and choices, but also it provides her with a safe marginal space where she can safely fight against injustice, patriarchy, and the tyranny of villains. Moreover, the burka gives courage to the female digital protagonist to evade the marginality she is facing as a female figure and join the mainstream fight for human, civil, environmental, and animal rights. Furthermore, the black color of the burka endows the protagonist with neutrality of gender, as this color exudes mystery and an element of anonymity, which helps her to remain invisible despite being very visible. She fights patriarchy and environmental pollution, and she also inculcates the message of preserving natural resources. *Burka Avenger* makes a global statement that any Muslim burka-clad woman does not need to be either saved by men suffering from “white savior complex” (Jailani 2016, 53–54) or by active “white liberal feminists” (Jailani 2016, 53–54). She can fight for her social, environmental, legal, individual, and collective rights with the power of books and pens. As a result, the costume of the burka is used to globally present a Pakistani posthumanist feminist figure to make a statement that women in veils do not always need to be saved, as they know how to take care not only of themselves, but of other beings around them as well.

Burka Avenger, an alter ego of Jiya in a burka costume, is actually a power position which allows her to fight with security and anonymity. The series suggests that women with burkas such as Burka Avenger and women without burkas such as Jiya are two sides of the same coin of Pakistani feminism, where women have to continue their struggle no matter if they are struggling with a veil or without it. Tehmina Pirzada (2017), a scholar on the impact of media on contemporary Pakistani society, agrees that “graphic narratives have become a powerful medium that represents the resistance of Muslim girlhood both in the context of local patriarchies and as a tool to challenge the stereotypical representation of Muslim identities globally” (88). Hence, the burka does not symbolize a hurdle to women’s emancipation in countries such as Pakistan, but signifies that the posthumanist feminist cause will continue its efforts both with and without a head-cover.

We have argued in this article that *Burka Avenger* draws new non-Western Pakistani posthuman feminist ontologies. The art of human animation creates a posthuman figure with a symbiosis of technologically mediated Pakistani female subjectivity with computer graphics and human subjectivities. *Burka Avenger* reconfigures Pakistani posthuman feminist discourse on education and veiling. It emphasizes the need to educate women so that they can fight for their rights. Additionally, it foregrounds the burka as a mysterious power that allows female figures to fight anonymously. In this sense, the veil has been transformed from a post-9/11 reductive symbol of oppression to an emblem of power to camouflage and fight from the margins. *Burka Avenger* is one of the relevant rhizomatic nodes of the many posthuman feminist ontologies present in the contemporary world. Consequently, we claim that *Burka Avenger* ushers in an onto-epistemological shift in contemporary non-Western posthuman feminist ideology and heralds the initiation of Pakistani feminism into the posthuman age.

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