

Incestuous Overtones in Mehreen Jabbar and Bano Qudsia's Laal Baig

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Abstract

This paper argues that the Pakistani telefilm Laal Baig carries incestuous overtones. Written by Bano Qudsia and directed by Mehreen Jabbar in 1999, Laal Baig is based on a conflict between a mother and her daughter-in-law. However, if it is critically revisited from a psychoanalytical perspective, it is realized that the distancing between the husband and wife stems from an incestuous relationship between the mother and the son. The specific terms extracted from the psychoanalytical theory include Oedipal Complex coined by Sigmund Freud and Jocasta Complex coined by Raymond de Saussure, considering that inclinations from both the mother and the son manifest themselves in the dramatic production under scrutiny. The telefilm's authentic file uploaded by the director herself on YouTube has been retrieved for analysis, while a 'reading between the lines' methodology has been applied on the dialogues of Laal Baig to procure the underlying ideas of the story and find answers to the following questions: What are the hidden reasons behind Begum Siddiqui's hatred for her daughter-in-law? Does this hatred find its roots in a tabooed feeling? If this is the case, then which dialogues from the telefilm insinuate an incestuous relation between Begum Siddiqui and Zafar? The study draws to a conclusion with the idea that Laal Baig provides a psychological justification for the common issue of Pakistan's married couples, that of an unfriendly relation between mothers and daughters-in-law.

Keywords: Incest, Jocasta Complex, Oedipal Complex

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Introduction

This paper critically analyses the Pakistani telefilm, Laal Baig, arguing that the dramatic production from 1999 is infused with incestuous overtones. Written by Bano Qudsia and directed by Mehreen Jabbar, Laal Baig is based on the household issue of Pakistan, that of a mother and daughter-in-law's tussle over a married man.

However, Laal Baig attempts delving deeper into the matter and finding out the psychological justifications of the characters' attitudes, resulting in the mother and son's inclination towards each other coming out as sexual.

The theoretical framework that has been opted for validating this argument is Psychoanalysis, the specific terms being Oedipus Complex

coined by Sigmund Freud and Jocasta Complex coined by Raymond de Saussure. Along-with, analyses on the appearance of cockroaches and dogs in dreams have also been consulted to have a better understanding of the symbols employed in the telefilm.

A review of the literature written on Bano Qudsia's work tells that the researches carried out on the writer's craft have mostly dealt with her fiction, that too being *Raja Gidh* in a majority of the cases. Farah Deeba and Dr Ahmed Usman, in their paper titled "Rediscovering the Discourse on Women's Freedom: A Feminist Exploration of Bano Qudsia's Fiction", take *Raja Gidh* as the primary work and study Bano Qudsia's take on modern and independent women. Hammad Farooq also focuses on the same novel in his paper, "The Infinite Curiosity: Exploring Romantic Tendencies in *Raja Gidh*" and argues that the novel has tropes of English Romanticism in it and it would not be unjust to call it a Romanticist piece of fiction. Muhammad Rizwan and Sumaira Akhtar move towards a different domain and study *Raja Gidh* from a linguistic point of view, focusing on the intermingling of English and Urdu languages in the novel through their paper, "An English-Urdu Code-mixing Textual Analysis of Bano Qudsia's Novel *Raja Gidh*". The research gap which this paper attempts to fill is the one created owing to a negligent attitude towards Bano Qudsia's dramatic work, and that too written for television.

The study employs a 'reading

between the lines' methodology on the telefilm's dialogues to have a thorough understanding of the story's underlying ideas. Considering that *Laal Baig* is an Urdu language work and that from the distant past, its file available on YouTube has been retrieved for researching while the dialogues have been transcribed into English language using indirect speech.

Through this study, an attempt has been made at finding answers to the following questions: What are the reasons behind Begum Siddiqui's hatred for her daughter-in-law? Does this hatred find its roots in a tabooed feeling? If this is the case, which dialogues from the telefilm insinuate an incestuous relation between Begum Siddiqui and Zafar?

Analysis

Laal Baig opens with a scene of Begum Siddiqui, a middle-aged woman, sitting in a psychiatrist's clinic, giving out nervous gestures and asking questions reflecting bafflement.

The idea that *Laal Baig* deals with the repressed desires of a human being validates itself with the psychiatrist's statement given while trying to make Begum Siddique probe into her unconscious. He says that a person's mind is but a pond, on the surface of which a few water-lilies coupled with fresh, green leaves keep floating, but what matters is the dry stuff which water carries in its depths. When the underlying withered and lifeless leaves reach the surface, a lot of

complications are solved. (Jabbar, 2011, 10:52)

This seems to be a very subtle and a careful reinforcement of the idea that "the desires that can't be fulfilled are packed, or repressed, into a particular place in the mind, which Freud labels the unconscious." (Klages, 1997, para. 4) Bano Qudsia keeps it symbolic and instead of directly saying that the repressed desires like incest, murder and cannibalism, considered to be the three snubbed wishes of every human being, come to the front when the unconscious part of the brain is shaken, makes use of metaphorical language and names the surface parts of the brain as water and the hidden desires as lifeless leaves which are not at work until consciously brought into action to see what keeps the human being disturbed.

This subtlety and symbolism pervade throughout *Laal Baig* because Begum Siddiqui, in the very start of the film, confesses that she hates the light (1:36), indirectly referring to the fact that it is with the dark layers of the human mind that her wishes are connected, and she is afraid that light or clarity might disclose her incestuous inclination towards her son. A few minutes later, when she does make an effort to recall her first day of restlessness, the first thing that comes into her mind is the day when her son, Zafar, brought his newly-wed wife, Amal to Karachi. Here, the director, Mehreen Jabbar inserts a flashback scene in which Zafar and Amal are entering their house and Begum

Siddiqui is alighting from the stairs. She is shown hugging her son, smiling at him and patting him on the cheek while turning her face towards the other side at the sight of her daughter-in-law. (6:31)

That Begum Siddiqui's hatred is based on jealousy and not on the typical idea that her daughter-in-law is not good at household work, as is usually the case in clashes between mothers and daughters-in-law, proves itself when after recalling this day, Begum Siddiqui asks her psychiatrist the meaning of envy. (7:16) After attaining the answer that it has got to do with an inferiority complex, Begum Siddiqui makes another confession. She says to the psychiatrist that it was like an envelope that her daughter-in-law wrapped herself around her Zafar. (7:57) This statement carries multiple important ideas. That Begum Siddiqui refers to Zafar as "her Zafar" conveys her unhealthy attachment towards her son as a result of which she exercises a certain control over him, and the simile of an envelope which she uses for her daughter-in-law tells that she is jealous of the time and attention which initially was hers but later on started being invested into the wife. Her disturbed sleep and the dream of the barbed wire and the dog also make their way into her life only after her son's marriage.

The dream which Begum Siddiqui describes to her psychiatrist is of a barbed wire that makes itself visible before her eyes. In the same dream, after the barbed wire, it is a dog that appears and barks before a tree,

pinning for it but not able to reach it. While it is easy to comprehend that a barbed wire symbolizes separation, and in the context of *Laal Baig*, the distancing of Begum Siddiqui from her son, it becomes important to see what dogs mean in dreams to understand the hidden idea behind the woman's dream. While dreams themselves are "concealed realizations of repressed desires" (Freud, 1921, para. 5), dogs in dreams are said to represent "a part of yourself kept hidden from others", and an angry, barking dog, as in Begum Siddiqui's dream, can mean that someone is "grouchy, irritated or unhappy". Also, a "dog in a dream might also be a "stand-in" for a friend or family member you want to protect". (Williams, 2017, para. 4)

All of these interpretations combined, hold true for the condition of Begum Siddiqui who is hiding a dark side of her personality, that of her too close an association with her son, who is unhappy at the arrival of Amal, and who wants to keep her son away from the young girl. This dream can also be interpreted in another way. The dog in yearning can be taken as Begum Siddiqui herself. If the tree is taken as a symbol of life, then for Begum Siddiqui, the life-giving tree can be her son with whom she has spent a major part of her life and from whom she has taken all of her life energy, but she is being stopped from going too close to him by the use of a collar in the neck, which symbolizes socio-cultural customs as hindrances between a mother and son's incestuous relationship.

The next scene in the film is the most important one, for creatively yet directly, it hints multiple times at the complex from which Begum Siddiqui suffers. This is the scene in which she remembers a bedroom conversation between her son and daughter-in-law, which to the disgust of the viewers, is both observed and intervened into by Begum Siddiqui. Here, it also becomes essential to see how the director has formulated the scene. The camera zooms the bed of the husband and wife and it is with the huge bed in the centre and Amal and Zafar walking around it instead of sitting or lying on it that their conversation is taking place, and Begum Siddiqui is standing in the door listening to them. (12:30)

This act on Begum Siddiqui's part is an explicit example of her jealousy with the intimacy between Zafar and Amal, as a result of which she has gone to the extent of observing what is happening in their bedroom. And what is happening in their bedroom is again important because it is based on a row between the husband and wife in which Amal repeatedly says to Zafar that he has not grown adolescent yet.

Through this statement of hers, it is told to the viewers that Amal and Zafar have not consummated their relationship, otherwise Amal would not have reiterated the statement that her husband is not an adolescent, but is still tied to the womb of her mother. This conveys the idea that Zafar has not been able to move out of the age in which a boy becomes "unconsciously sexually

attached to his mother" (McLeod, 2018, para. 4), as a result of which he fails to have intercourse with his wife because the idea of his mother as the fulfiller of his sexual desires has been incorporated strongly into him. It is due to these infantile desires not having resolved themselves that Zafar is still an adolescent who cannot make it out with a young girl.

At this point, Begum Siddiqui also comes forward with a surprisingly bolder manifestation of her carnal desire for her son when she says that only two women are associated with a man, one from whose body he comes into being, and the other who comes into the world from his being; in essence, his mother and his daughter (13:47). By saying this, Begum Siddiqui tries to convey the idea that the women who matter the most for a man are those who are physically associated with him, and at the basis of whose connection with him lies a sexual activity. Later on, Begum Siddiqui goes on to say that since a man is closer to only his mother and his daughter, she wishes that Zafar may never have a daughter (15: 13). She does not say anything after this but makes it clear that it is not only a wife which she does not want in her son's life, but the presence of a daughter as well will disturb her, which suggests that there is the only woman which she wants in her son's life, and that is she herself.

When she tries to justify herself, she unconsciously states the causes which in Psychology, are considered to be the causes of Jocasta

Complex, the sexual inclination of a mother towards her son. What Begum Siddiqui says is that she got widowed at the age of eighteen and spent the rest of her life with her son (16:54). About Jocasta Complex, it is said that the phenomenon is "something perhaps particularly relevant with an intelligent son and an absent/weak father figure" ("Jocasta Complex", 2014).

This cause holds true in the case of Begum Siddiqui who when tells that her husband passed away when she was just eighteen years old, is lamenting at the wasting away of her young age in which she was extremely beautiful. Probably as a result of this loss, she invested all her love and energy in her son, the only man left in her life after the death of her husband.

However, even after having made these cathartic statements, Begum Siddiqui's hatred towards her daughter-in-law does not abate and she does not allow her son to leave the house along-with Amal. Later on, the viewers are told that before the two women were able to resolve their conflict, Zafar passed away and Begum Siddiqui started hallucinating cockroaches on her bed as well as on her son's funeral pyre.

At this point, Begum Siddiqui also starts accusing her daughter-in-law of being a cockroach and says to her that she is the insect which comes out at night and crawls (28:07).

This statement by Begum Siddiqui conveys the idea that by

considering her daughter-in-law a cockroach which comes out at night only, she is referring towards her jealousy at Amal becoming a part of her son's nights, or to put it more directly, at Amal becoming her son's sexual partner with whom he is to share the bed after marriage.

Psychoanalytically, "Freudian analysts like Camille Paglia have seen the cockroach as symbol not just of the underside but also of the dark and sexual powers of the id" (Copeland, 2003, p.114).

This psychoanalysis helps us in understanding three important scenes from the telefilm, one based on cockroaches lying on Begum Siddiqui's bed, one based on the accusation that Amal is a cockroach, and one of her fear of cockroaches.

When Begum Siddiqui is asked by the psychiatrist regarding her first experience of envisioning cockroaches, she recalls the day of her son's death and his pyre lying before her eyes, covered with cockroaches, followed by another hallucination, that of cockroaches crawling on her bed. If Paglia's analysis about cockroaches being a symbol of one's hidden sexual inclinations is brought under consideration, then Begum Siddiqui's cockroach hallucinations after her son's death would suggest that it is after losing her son that she has realized what kept her connected with him, something beyond the simple mother-son relation. It was in her unconscious when Zafar was alive that she is

incestuously involved in him, and it is after his death that her hidden desire has surfaced and brought pain. The idea proves itself as somewhat correct when we see that even Begum Siddiqui's bed is covered in cockroaches. A sex symbol is imagined on the bed is a manifestation of the idea that what the mother is missing at this point is a sharing of bed with her son, but something which she does not wish to express or believe herself, considering that the cockroaches make her scared. This fear of cockroaches also makes itself visible in the psychiatrist's clinic when the woman starts imagining the cockroaches on her clothes and tries to make them go away. Her gesture of cleaning herself of the cockroaches also suggests that although she knows what is going on in her mind, she is not ready to accept it because of the society and is therefore trying to cleanse herself of the taboo of incest. Moreover, Begum Siddiqui's statement that her daughter-in-law is not a human being but a cockroach carries the idea that for Begum Siddiqui, the wife is the cockroach because it was with confidence and without any reservations that Amal entered Zafar's life as someone who could actively have a sexual experience with him, something which Begum Siddiqui herself wanted to do.

The audience is also made to know here that although Amal did enter Zafar's life as a sexual partner, she could not induce him to make love, for he was too filled with the idea of his mother as his only lover. Multiple dialogues by Amal come forward as

shreds of evidence of Zafar's sexual activity with a young girl being something that has been snubbed, overpowered by the love of his mother, or he is afraid to have intercourse with his wife in fear of giving birth to a daughter who would share the physical connection he has with his mother. After Zafar's funeral, Amal is found saying to her mother-in-law that she tried a lot to breathe life into Zafar's living dead body through her hot breaths, but failed because Zafar's mother had snatched away the desire of life from her son (27:40). If rewritten in a non-creative manner, this statement would mean nothing else but that Amal tried to incline Zafar to make love with her through her burning sexual desire, but he refused to give a chance to another woman.

Thus Amal's concern that her husband needs to move out of Begum Siddiqui's house to give his wife a healthy love comes as justified, for it is while envisioning a future of the husband and wife together that Amal says that she will rob Zafar of everything that he has hidden, and in return, nature will make him adolescent (19:08). By this, she means that it is when Zafar will be separated from his mother that he will be able to openly make use of his sexual organs before his wife and will be finally rendered adolescent.

However, to the misfortune of both the women, Zafar passes away, surprisingly leaving both the women not as haters but transforming them into caretakers of each other. The

abnormality which Begum Siddiqui faces after losing her son is treated by a psychiatrist the sessions with whom are organized by Amal herself. It is both interesting and surprising to see that the two women who were at a war with each other when Zafar was alive befriend one another after his death. It is not only Begum Siddiqui who says to the psychiatrist that her daughter-in-law cares for her a lot, but Amal herself also says that Begum Siddiqui is the only tangible memory that she has of Zafar. Amal's statement provides a profound understanding of the confusion regarding both the women's sudden liking for each other. It tells that both of the women were madly in love with Zafar, so much so that they did not allow anyone else to enter his life but themselves kept revolving around him. And when he finally left or walked away from between the two women, they had no one to look for support but each other. The domestic issue was so much intense that the only memories the women could find of Zafar had to be from inside the house, and since there was nothing but two humans as quarrelling objects acting as the only memory of Zafar, they held on to each other.

It also needs to be discussed why Begum Siddiqui turns paranoid after her son's death and Amal manages to control her nerves. This subtly points at the intensity of emotions which Zafar provided to both the women. Amal's dialogues stated above have already told us that Amal and Zafar were never able to consummate their relationship, and therefore Amal failed at having her

physical desires fulfilled through Zafar. It might be one of the reasons why Amal does not lose senses at her husband's death because their relationship was never complete or rich enough. However, Begum Siddiqui's madness suggests that the relationship between the mother and son was so strong that Begum Siddiqui not only loses her mind but also starts seeing insects which symbolize sexual activity. This tells that the woman who had a physical connection with her son from a very young age goes mad while the one who kept her love spiritual managed to remain calm. That the mother's relation was a lustful one and the wife's relation a spiritual one is proved by Amal's dialogue in which she says that she married Zafar with the desire of seeping into his soul (14:40) and can rid herself of the desire of his body if she wishes to (14:48), countered by the mother's wish that Zafar may not give birth to a daughter lest he may develop a physical connection with another woman.

The fact that Begum Siddiqui kept hiding her carnal desire for her son from Amal is proven when in the last scene of the film, she asks her psychiatrist not to tell Amal what she has told him. Although the viewers are not told what it is which she has directly told the psychiatrist, from the flashback scenes and the dialogues, what is deduced is that Begum Siddiqui finally confessed that she was in love in an unusual way with her son. This deduction is also made based on the initial statement of the psychiatrist in which he asks Begum Siddiqui to revisit her unconscious and probe into her repressed desires so that her

conflicts may be resolved. Her convalescence along-with a fear that she might be exposed connect all the strings in a meaningful way and tell that she has succeeded in coming face to face with her suppressed inclinations.

Conclusions

A critical analysis of *Laal Baig* not only provides us with a psychological justification of a common issue of our country, that of conflicts between mothers and daughters-in-law but also makes us realize that Pakistani television drama has moved from a subtle and creative treatment of subjects to a superficial one. *Laal Baig* addresses an issue which is there in every Pakistani television drama, but the nuances of the relationships in a household are not dealt with, nor are the psyches of the characters probed into as is done with *Begum Siddiqui*.

Through this research, an effort has been made to bring a such a Pakistani telefilm to the front which owing to its creativity and underlying deep ideas falls perfectly into a complex theoretical framework and to propagate the idea that a dramatic production does not have to stretch itself over twenty episodes, but a thirty-minute long piece can tend to establish itself as a literary work with its bold but carefully crafted dialogues.

The social relevance of this study is comprehensible through the unfortunate fact that even after more than two decades of the telefilm's

release, episodes based on this issue keep raising their heads in the Pakistani society time and again, making us realize that we still need to delve deep into the matter and see where the root of the problem lies, something which Bano Qudsia and Mehreen Jabbar attempted to do back in the 1990s.

However, the limitation of this research lies in the lack of an in-depth analysis of the visual techniques employed by the director. Since the objective of the research was targeted at the written content and not at the directorial art, the telefilm's colour symbols, music and settings incorporating minimal props have not been earnestly looked into, although they complement the theme of the telefilm quite well and render the duo of Mehreen Jabbar and Bano Qudsia a commendable one.

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