

Pakistani Popular Fiction: Scope and The Genre Game

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Abstract

This research traces the significance of the genre of Pakistani popular fiction by probing into the thematic context and tropes of popular fiction writings. It explores how the popular fiction of Pakistan not only provides entertainment but it also serves the function of preserving social and cultural values along with educating the people about social issues. It aims to study the contribution of an author in presenting the cultural setup, transferring the traditions, and breaking the stereotypes, particularly through popular fiction. The research also investigates the role of an author in the formation of a brand in the field of popular fiction which explains the game of this genre. The author chosen for depicting the scope of this genre is Farhat Ishtiaq. It further establishes the concept that since Pakistani popular fiction (Urdu digests, novels, magazines) shapes popular thinking and caters to the larger audience including common masses, therefore, this genre should be given more attention in the field of research either by translations or by discovering the different dimensions and their scope in the academic field. Future researchers can elaborate the notion of whether the content of Urdu popular fiction is refined enough to compare it with highbrow literature and can it be given a similar status to that of Pakistani Anglophone literature or not.

Keywords: Stereotypes, Popular Fiction, Genre, Highbrow Literature, Anglophone Literature

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Introduction

Each year thousands of authors all over the world publish their writings and represent their region by depicting the historical, cultural, and social life of their people. Many of these writings are

acknowledged globally as these writings have the local touch of the land in where they are produced. A lot of research has been done on western literature and writings despite the language barrier which was overcome

by translations. Both literature and pulp fiction have a mass readership. Pakistani writings particularly Pakistani popular fiction still lack research because of which these writings are deprived of their due status. This paper aims to present the rich local flavor of Pakistani pop fiction [popular fiction] and the role of popular authors in shaping society.

This research explores how popular Pakistani fiction writers have a large readership and the content they produce is deeply rooted in Pakistani lifestyle, culture, and society which provide a bright opportunity for literary research. Farhat Ishtiaq is a renowned author in Pakistan whose writings fulfill the criterion of the genre of popular fiction writings. Hence, few of her writings are taken to explain the game of this genre.

Whether Pakistani popular fiction writings have any literary scope to do academic research on them or not is still a problematic question for many researchers and critics in Pakistan. To address this problem this research traces the scope of this genre in Pakistan through their consumption and by tracing the role of popular fiction authors towards society. The

rich thematic content and depiction of the daily life of Pakistani society kneaded in the social context make these writings worth digging into.

Moreover, the recent studies have declared several new genres and forms worth discussing under literary studies. Songs, movies, advertisements, documentaries, and even speeches are considered literary documents and a large amount of literary criticism is available on them. The genre of popular fiction has also attracted researches for academic and literary criticism.

Popular fiction is a most recent genre which has gained the interest of many readers and has recently been included in the field of academic studies but when it comes to the question of defining the genre then there is no fixed definition of it. This is because it provides insight into class structures, cultural values, and dominant ideologies which change with time. According to Glover and Maccracken simplest definition of popular fiction is that it includes “those books everyone reads, usually imagined as league tables of best sellers whose aggregate figures dramatically

illustrate an impressive ability to reach across wide social and cultural divisions with remarkable commercial success”(p.1). Pakistani popular fiction has the characteristics described by the above-mentioned definition. Several sub-genres come under popular fiction like historical romance, murder mysteries, and crime thrillers, etc. Popular fiction values convention and repetition, readers and genre, commercial success, and acclaim of readers and plot.

Research Questions:

1. What is the scope of Pakistani Popular Fiction?
2. What is the role of a Popular Fiction author in contributing to society?
3. How do Farhat Ishtiaq's writings serve as a brand in Fiction writings and what impact do these writings have on readers?

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative, interpretive, and explorative in nature. Primary sources include Farhat Ishtiaq's writings; *Humsafer and Diyar-e Dil*. The secondary sources are scholarly articles, digests, online magazine reviews, television, and

youtube. Popular fiction is a relatively newer genre in Pakistan therefore, a dearth of academic criticism proved to be a hindrance in the research.

Discussion and Analysis

Popular fiction not only caters to the taste of the masses but also shapes the psyche and develops the thinking of a reader about several new and old ideas. Pakistani popular fiction mostly includes Urdu novels and magazines. As a National language Urdu is understood by the masses and even those people who have a basic understanding of reading and writing Urdu, read popular fiction available in the magazines like *Shuaa* and *Khaateen Digest* on regular basis. These Urdu writings have a larger readership therefore, the popular fiction of Pakistan comprises Urdu Fiction.

The role of an author is pertinent in the field of popular fiction as readers become loyal to a particular author for his/ her writing style and storytelling technique. Thus, an author becomes a brand and his/her books give birth to fan fiction. Whenever a new series of books or even a book of that particular author comes on the market, it sells like hotcakes. In Pakistan, a trend is followed in which many novels

get serialized in local digests like *Shuaa*, *Pakiiza*, and *Khawateen Digest* before being published as a complete book. These digests are readily available in almost every book store and newspaper corner at a cheap price. Thus publication, distribution, and story-telling of an author are the major factors in the formation of a brand.

Although popular fiction, fan fiction, and pulp fiction are western concepts but publications, story-telling, and distribution of these writings are similar to Pakistani pop fiction. Moreover, the concept of brand formation is also similar to western popular fiction. If in the West people anticipate the new book in Harry Potter series by J.K Rowling, here in Pakistan people anticipate a new monthly episode of Ferhant Ishtiq's novels. One striking feature of Pakistani pop fiction which differs from the West is that it is relatively closer to reality. The stories revolve around Pakistani society and these writings often discuss social issues.

Popular fiction of Pakistan depicts the culture and tradition of Pakistan. Pakistan's Urdu popular fiction not only provides entertainment

but also performs the functions of educating the people and transferring moral and sometimes even religious values to the readers. *Mashaf* by Nimra Ahmad and *Pir-e-Kamil* by Umera Ahamd are the two popular fiction novels that deal in the subjects of spirituality and religion. Many times Popular Fiction of Pakistan presents the picture of the society as accurately as Pakistani high-brow literature. The stories published in *Shuaa*, *pakiza*, *Khawateen Digest*, and other popular fiction brand publishers are woven around the traditions, norms, and cultural setup of Pakistan. Although stories are fictional, the social values which they portray are realistic and are plucked from Pakistani soil.

Since the last two decades, popular fiction is much influenced by the wave of feminism. The majority of the popular fiction authors are females and local magazines like *Khawateen Digest* target majorly the female audience. Both in domestic households and among working-class women regular supply of these digests has a great impact on forming the new trends. Popular fiction is used as a platform for negotiating a space for women in the educational, professional, and overall

patriarchal setup of the country. Many female authors from all over the world whether popular fiction writers or literature personnel have effectively availed the platform to spread awareness regarding women's rights and have set up a trend of portraying strong independent women fighting for their rights.

Pakistani popular fiction is mostly consumed by female readers. The impact of fiction writers like that of Farhat Ishtiaq and other popular fiction writers particularly on the females is great as the message regarding social issues reaches a large number of females who are the nurturing and educating figures for future generations. Asdar while noticing the popularity index of the magazines narrates his findings-“women digests such as *Pakiza* or *Doshiza* have a monthly circulation of 60,000 copies reaching an average of 300,000 adult readers far more than the first run of most respectable literary publications (p.131).”

Pakistani popular fiction writers are moving more toward reality as they believe in raising social and domestic issues and spreading

awareness among the readers. Kamran Asdar Ali's research on pulp fiction of Pakistan reveals that literary skills and modes of reformed behavior are opened for women to articulate their rights in marriage and property (p.127). Similarly, issues like child molestation, dowry as a curse, and child marriages are repeatedly raised by authors like Umera Ahmad, Nimra Ahmad, and Farhat Ishtiaq.

Popular fiction authors provide space to their readers where they can escape from harsh realities as well as enjoy the vivid view of exotic lands. They get charmed by the skill of characterization of author where kind and well-educated hero are independent, respected and strong females dwell together to form a perfect couple in an ideal society. Many popular fiction authors like Umera Ahmad and Farhat Ishtiaq are criticized for spoiling the minds of youth by giving this ideal utopian world view which is far away from reality. But this trait of fantasy and happy endings are what make these writings popular fiction. Popular fiction readers give money to visit this ideal world to get away from the harsh realities of life. Popular fiction authors have taken this

criticism positively as they believe that their writings have a certain impact on readers and if their readers feel comfortable after reading their stories, they are happy to write this way. Farhat Ishtiaq says in an interview, “what's the harm in writing fantasies if readers like them”(Dawn).

A fantasy indeed is one of the dominant elements in many Pakistani fiction writings but, Pakistani popular fiction is not only limited to traits of fantasies and Romances. The social and didactic elements coexist with fantasy to form the right balance of entertainment and guidance. The authors portray the conventions, preserve the culture, break the stereotypes, build the popular taste, educate the readers about social issues, and even portray the psychological traumas and how to deal with them. This multitasking by popular fiction authors and diversity of subjects make them popular among the readers and they become able to form a brand out of their writings.

Farhat Ishtiaq is one of Pakistan's most well-read writers who has written not only novels and short stories but has earned a name as a

screenplay writer and many of her novels are also adapted into famous television dramas. She gained popularity with her stories published in *Khawateen Digest*. She aspires to depict the cultural life in Pakistan. Her celebrated works include *Humsafer*, *Mata –e –Jaan Hy Tu*, *Bin Roy Ansu*, *Wo Jo Qarz Rakhy Thy Jaan Pr*, and *Diyar-e –Dil*. Ishtiaq weaves her plot usually around Pakistani setup and her pattern of happy endings after trial of love is much loved by readers. Her strong grip on emotions and the psychological mindscape of her characters has gained her massive readership. Ishtiaq and many popular fiction writers receive fans' letters through their publishers and editors who give critical reviews on their work. Sometimes readers are so much touched by the stories that they even request to mold the endings. Farhat Ishtiaq narrates one such incident in which she says that a fan pleaded to write a sequel to her novel *Mata-e-Jaan Hy Tu* by bringing back the protagonist Abi from death and portraying that he was in a coma (Dawn).

Farhat Ishtiaq's writings have a common trait with that of Dickens, Ibsen, and Shaw as these are serving the

similar function of reforming and educating society. The only difference and additional trait of Ishtiaq's writings subtly spread awareness. The element of fantasy and characterization is similar to Mills and Boons. The family drama helps to convey the message in a lighter tone. Rather than being satirical like Ibsen, the touch of fantasy and indirect way of teaching makes Farhat Ishtiaq a brand of popular fiction.

The characterization of protagonists such as Ashar and Khirad in *Humsafar* and Aabi in *Mata-e Jaan Hy Tu* with good looks, good education, and pure heart is the formula that is sold. The mere plot is not what attracts the reader, it is the dreams which are bought and cherished by the readers of popular fiction. The aspiration of lavish houses, exotic lands, united family, kind and beautiful heroines, and liberal-minded and chivalrous heroes make popular fiction worth buying and reading.

Farhat Ishtiaq's writings have many elements which fulfill the criteria of responsibility of an artist towards society. Even though Ishtiaq is popular as a popular fiction author but her work caters to many social issues and

educates the audience to stick to the moral roots of society. *Rihaee* which was later adapted as television series gave a new direction to existing television trends. Ishtiaq reveals several evils of a patriarchal system, domestic abuse, and child marriage. The plot is inspired by real-life incidents of the victims in Kashaf Foundation. Ishtiaq has depicted the struggle of females from poverty-ridden households and gave the message of realizing self-worth and taking a stand against domestic abuse. *Mata e Jaan Hy Tu* is another piece of fiction by Ishtiaq in which she gave a new trend of an independent girl living with in-laws after the death of her husband. Domestic abuse, an evil embedded in society, is also presented in the novel.

In *Yakeen ka Safar*, Ishtiaq has taken a bold step of presenting the abuse of power by politicians, sexual abuse [rape victim case], and violence against women in political setup. The surviving love story under these brutal circumstances made it easier to depict the flaws of society without losing the readership due to the portrayal of bitter realities of life. Ishtiaq is a master of writing love stories with twists. *Bin Roy*

Ansu is another love story novel in which the evil of sister's rivalry in a love affair is exposed but with the twist of guilt and chance of love for the second time. Ishtiaq's popularity is increasing greater than ever because of television adaptations of her novels as well as her decision of writing screenplays. *Udari* is a milestone in the history of television drama as it discusses boldly the issues like child molestation and sexual assaults. The awareness of these issues has made readers and viewers even more careful and alert for their children's safety. Ishtiaq's style of amalgamation of reality and fantasy has increased her readership. Educated people of Pakistan who previously degraded her writings as regressive fiction are now acknowledging her skills because of her art of twisting reality with fantasy as an effective tool of educating the masses. Asdar Ali is of the view that these stories should be read as narratives that seek to represent effective social change (p.141).

Ishtiaq effectively uses the platform of popular fiction for preserving the traditions, culture, and moral values of Pakistani society. There are several tropes conventional as well

as modern and trendy which are illustrated by her writings. For example, arranged marriage is one of the biggest blissful occasions in Pakistani society which not only depicts the rituals and ceremonies but also presents the traditional values attached to the marriage and several norms observed in it. Where to arrange marriage is desirable for Pakistani parents, a new trend of love-cum-arranged marriage is received with open minds by readers of popular fiction. Flexible notions regarding marriage are given by the author so that couple can lead a happy life without parents' disapproval. Umara Ahmad's *Zindagi Gulzar Hy* and *Mohabbat Subh Ka Sitara* are romantic novels in which love marriage, and the issue of approval from families is portrayed. Similarly, Ferhat Ishtiaq's *Humsafer* and *Mata-e Jaan Hy Tu* also deal with the concept of marriage with conventional and new notions and the bonding of couples in families. Both writers have given the message that if children are happy with their partner then parents should accept the new member of the family with an open heart. Moreover, the wedding of the protagonist is one of the most awaited scenes by the readers. This anticipation

is often taken as an opportunity by popular fiction writers to present, instruct and convey a set of ideas on the topic of marriage.

The cultural depiction of marriage ceremonies, *Sadqa* (charity) at the occasion of birth in the family, a ritual of Eid prayer, *namaz*, communal gatherings at funerals and weddings as well as the behavior of people at such occasions is shown in detailed scenes so that value system of Pakistan does not get ravished by the wind of western ideals and trends. The respect and reverence for parents and elders of the family especially in old age is preserved with great emphasis and transferred to the next generation. Examples of obedience of elders are Khrid and Ashar's approval of marriage as a respect to the wish of their parents in *Humsafar* and Wali's reverence for Agha Jaan (grandparent) in *Diyar-e-Dil*.

"Blood is thicker than water" is one of the pertinent tropes in Pakistani popular fiction. Particularly women from all fields; middle-aged women, educated as well as domestic and working-class women all cherish Ferhat Ishtiaq's writings because of her

skill of depicting the culture of Pakistan where family is a united whole. When one lives in a society there are several factors that become the reason for the split between family members. A few of them are poverty, love marriages, ego issues, a fight between in-laws and daughter in law and choosing a career for oneself. Farhat Ishtiaq's novels are also based on these conflicts but no matter how crucial the circumstances are, the family becomes a united whole once again by the end of the novel. Sometimes children realize their mistakes and sometimes parents realize that they need to cut short their ego and give space to their children for their betterment. The ways in which family supports a person in the period of crisis and how it celebrates happiness strengthens the fact that the most sincere relationships for a person are his blood relations. The trope of psychological trauma by living away from family is repeated almost in every novel of Farhat Ishtiaq.

Pakistan's culture and value system's basic unit is family. The concept of a nuclear family is a western concept. The recent trend of following western values by Pakistani youth is discouraged by the elders in Pakistan

and even popular fiction writers do not idealize it unless there is no other choice left other than this. Therefore, Farhat reunites the children of the family with their roots and presents the social and psychological impact of breakup in the novels like *Mata-e-Jaan Hy Tu*, *Humsafar*, and *Diyar-e-Dil*.

Diyar-e-Dil and *Humsafer* are the two novels of Ishtiaq which depict the importance of familial ties and that one cannot live a satisfying life by breaking ties with family members. Children play the role of binding factor between family members. Even if the conflict continues to the next generation, sooner or later children of the families reunite with the elders and bring an end to their agony caused by this split.

Diyar-e-Dil (Valley of the heart) was first published in *Shuaa* digest in sections and later it was published as a complete novel in 2010 by Ilm-o-Irfan publishers. It is a story of landlord Bakhtiyar's family which fell apart due to a clash between elder son Behroz and father Bakhtiyar on the matter of love marriage. It reveals how Faraah and Wali – children of two sons of Bakhtiyar reunite the family. It also

depicts the journey of two brothers' emotional bond which shatters when both brothers get separated due to the rift between father and son. This novel illustrates that blood relations cannot be broken by the circumstances and if they are neglected for some time one's soul remains restless until the bond is reconciled. The traditional plot tropes that come under this umbrella are the importance of familial bonds are; in-law's approval for marriage, the conflict caused by the traditional notion of love marriage versus arranged marriage, and guilt of leaving behind the family relationships.

The issue of ego and authoritarian nature of Agha Jaan (Bakhtiyar Khan) brings distance between himself and Behroze and between two brothers. Family name and Bhaktiyar's commitment to his brother that his niece will become his daughter-in-law blinds him for time being and when Behroze did not show up on his *Nikkah*, he gets Aminah (niece) and his younger son Sohaib married. The importance of giving a word in landlord families is matter of life and death and Ishtiaq has targeted this notion which sometimes proves to be the reason for many unjustified acts

and causes repairable damages to the relationships. The scapegoating of Aminah and Sohaib by their forced marriage results in another trauma and burden on the conscience of the couple. When Wali is born they decide to live happily for sake of their child and bring him up in a normal happy environment by forgetting the circumstances in which they got married. Here Wali unties the knot of his parent's relationship and gives them the reason for a new fresh start. When Farah is born after some time to complete Behroze's family, the bond of Rohina and Behroze further strengthens up- "child is a strong string between husband and wife" (Ishtiaq 67).

The suffering of Sohaib and Behroze is heart-rendering as both miss each other and spend teary nights for 20 long years. Sohaib keeps checking on Behroze and keeps requesting him to come back. He informs him that Agha Jaan is breaking from inside because of their separation. The agony of vacuum between family relationships and the guilt of not getting back as a united whole engulfs the life of both brothers. Sohaib while describing the need for blood relationship says, "Behroze you and I and Agha Jaan are held together

by a strong string. Twenty years [of separation] are nothing because this string cannot be broken even in twenty centuries. These are relationships of hearts and blood (Ishtiaq 178)."

Behroze and Sohaib's last wishes were to provide a shelter of love and protection to their children and to unite the family and therefore, they put forward the same last wish of getting Faraah and Wali married which proves to be the right decision. Rohina and Farah realize that Agha Jaan and his family are their only protectors in the world. Behroze had realized it before dying therefore he advises Faarah, "Child this [Agha Jaan's house] is your home, our own house, our true origin. Child, I want to unite you with your roots (Ishtiaq 210)." Ishtiaq conveys the message that child engagement, ego issues, impetuous nature, misunderstandings, forced marriages, and stubbornness in accepting the love partner of children can cause a rift between families but these issues are resolvable. Ishtiaq, in a tender and emotional scene of reunion between father and son, explains that one should cut his ego short and anchor the sinking boat of blood relationships timely. Agha Jaan while repenting of his

mistakes says, "let's accept our mistakes. Few wrong decisions are taken by me and few by you (Ishtiaq 200)". This is how Ishtiaq presents the values of the Pakistani family system where differences can separate family members for some time but they always return to their roots- "one should never break the familial ties. These have no alternative (Ishtiaq 214)". Ishtiaq gathers the spreading pieces of the puzzle and makes it a complete whole by showing that Faarah and Wali start living as a happily married couple in their ancestral house with Agha Jaan.

Humsafar [Companion] is another cherished novel of Ferhat Ishtiaq which presents a gripping love story caught into the network of family politics. Ishtiaq skillfully resolves the conflict by the end of the novel without abandoning any blood relation. *Humsafar* was first published in *Khawateen Digest* [July 2007-Jan2008] and later it was published as a complete novel in 2008. The plot revolves around Ashar and Khirad's arranged marriage which is saved by their daughter Hareem. Ashar and Khirad are cousins who tie a knot in undesirable circumstances of Khirad's mother's illness. Ashar's mother Freeda

never accepts the marriage wholeheartedly and causes misunderstanding between them which results in their separation. Four years later Khirad returns to Ashar's life to demand money for their daughter's medical expenses as she is suffering from heart disease. Ashar feels a magnetic pull towards his daughter and they start living together as a family for their child's sake, deciding that they would part their ways once Hareem gets medically fit. They take care of Hareem who wants everything done for her by her parents together. During this time the misunderstanding between them gets resolved. Ashar's mother loses her mind when she realizes that she has ruined many lives but Ashar and Khirad forgive her and they all live together.

The trope of obedience as a means of expression of love and respect towards one's parent is portrayed in *Humsafar* through the marriage of Ashar and Khirad who were strangers to each other before meeting for the first time due to Khirad's mother's illness. Baseerat remains busy in his life and the guilt of neglecting his sister makes him decide on Ashar's marriage with Khirad. When Khirad's mother asks

Baseerat to find her daughter a respectable groom who would love Khirad, Baseerat trusts Ashar to be the right choice. Ashar despite being unhappy with the decision marries Khirad for the sake of his father. The notion of obedience and strengthening of blood bond through cousin marriage is depicting the Pakistani way of depicting love and reverence of family members for each other. Cousin marriage is a norm still rooted in Pakistani society as a means of keeping the blood relations alive and dear for life.

When Khirad is thrown out of the house after getting blamed for adultery, Khirad still waits for Ashar as she believes that he has got the letter in which she has written that she is pregnant. She waited for him as she had a belief that he would never abandon their child. She lost all hopes when Asher did not reach their daughter's birth. Her disappointment turned into anger and hate for him as she was ready to forgive Ashar as his wife but she could never forgive Ashar as a father who she believed neglected Hareem. Ironically, Hareem became the reason for their reunion and proved to be that strong link that connected the parents

and they forgot their differences for sake of Hareem. Taking care of Hareem, reading her stories, making her eat, tucking her into bed, and watching TV together as a family makes Ashar understand Khirad. Ashar overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and embarrassment apologizes Khirad and pleads her to come back in his life for Hareem, "If Hareem had not been in our lives I would have gone far away from you... Khirad by all means don't forgive me but Please for Hareem's sake accept me once more (Ishtiaq, 2008, p.313)".

Ashar's mother goes into depression when Ashar confronts her for her injustice with Khirad. But her decision of not abandon her mother depicts the social and familial values of Pakistan where parents are respected and not abandoned and sent to old homes for any reason.

Ishtiaq's readership has provided her status of "Queen of Romance" (*Dawn*) and one factor of her popularity is a television adaptation of her novels. Her narrative reached out to even international audiences through translations and dubbing of her novels and Television dramas

respectively into several languages. *Diyar-e Dil*, *Mata-e –Jaan Hy Tu*, and *Humsafar* are not only much-loved novels of Ishtiaq but cherished TV dramas of Pakistan. *Humsafar* broke all records of popularity and proved to be a milestone in the history of the Pakistan Television Industry. It is dubbed in Arabic for Middle Eastern audiences and is now available on *Netflix*. *The Pioneer* titled the review of *Humsafar* with “Pakistan's love affair with *Humsafar*” which speaks of its popularity.

Conclusions

Conclusively, this genre has potential in the field of academics if we dig into the thematic content of Pakistani popular Fiction therefore, it should be explored under the lens of different theoretical frameworks. Ishtiaq has been providing entertainment along with reforming society by writing against issues like forced marriages, authoritarian parenthood, sexual abuse, and class prejudice. She has also preserved the Pakistani culture and values and has passed these to new generations. Her writings maintain an equilibrium of elements of fantasy and realism,

therefore; she is a much-loved author and a big name in Pakistani popular fiction writings.

Furthermore, Pakistani popular fiction fulfills the standards of Merriam Webster's online dictionary definition of "literary"; “of, relating to, or having the characteristics of humane learning or literature.” This paper has explored the influence of popular fiction on society and popular tropes of Pakistani pop fiction which establishes that Pakistani Popular Fiction has literary underpinnings. Pakistani popular fiction as discussed in the research paper proves its scope for academic research. More acknowledgment from the literary critics and researchers is required to bring these writings to an international platform.

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