# “*Itni Behuda Aurat*[1]*!*”: Lesbianism and Queer Spatial Politics in Angeline Malik’s *Chewing Gum*

***Syeda Momina Masood*** * **&** ***Mr. Khurshid Alam*** **

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper is a queer spatial study of the episode* Chewing Gum *of the Pakistani anthology series,* Kitni Girhaiñ Bāqi Haiñ[2] *(2016- ). This 40-minute episode marked the first instance of onscreen lesbianism in Pakistani visual media, and was subject to much controversy immediately following its air date. This paper will look into how Malik constructs female queerness onscreen, and how she sees female deviant sexualities as potentially threatening to heteronormative structures, especially to the state-sponsored institution of marriage, and the sacrosanct domestic, martial space.* Chewing Gum *configures domesticity as a state of being closeted which is broken in and dismantled by Qandeel, a queer woman who performs heterosexuality as a means of intruding upon the private space, and then de-phallicises it. The queer women of* Chewing Gum, *thus, create an emancipative space which accommodates anti-nationalist and non-normative identities. Moreover, through them queer experience itself has been reimagined as being internally heterogenous, thus complicating what it means to be queer within Pakistani urban and nationalist cartographies.*

**Keywords:** lesbianism, queer theory, queer spaces, queer postcoloniality, Pakistani television, heteronormativity, female queerness, queer visibility, anti-urban geographies, queer heterotopias, capitalism, queer futurity, femme lesbianism, homonormativity

* Email: momina0710@gmail.com
** Email: khurshidalum@hotmail.com

## Introduction:

This paper situates itself in the field of gender studies and queer theory as it looks at the construction of deviant female sexuality in the episode *Chewing Gum* of Angeline Malik's anthology television series, *Kitni Girhaiñ Bāqi Haiñ* (2016- ). This research borrows from Kate Hepworth's understanding of the queer as "other" not simply in terms of gender and sexuality (1999), but following Donna McCormack and Judith Halberstam, queerness incorporates antinormative ways of being, living, and belonging. How an individual relates to the body politic, or how an individual creates emancipative spaces around itself to function and achieve mobility are all aspects of contemporary queer studies that this paper will draw upon. Furthermore, due to the current non-existence of a Pakistan-specific lesbian studies, this paper uses Western formulations of queer theory.

Where queer spaces are concerned, Hepworth understands a queer space which "challenges the hegemonic codings of everyday space" (93). Invoking Aaron Betsky, Hepworth argues that a queer space "functions as a counter-architecture, appropriating, subverting, mirroring, and choreographing the orders of everyday life in new and liberating ways" (ibid.). This paper will look into how queer spaces are constructed in/outside the city, as well as inside the domestic space. *Chewing Gum*, therefore, functions as a subversive discourse which challenges patriarchal structures and heteronormative conceptions of womanhood and queerness.

On its airing, *Chewing Gum* received backlash from an array of media sources, and even got PEMRA to issue a notice against Hum TV stating that "homosexuality […] is completely against our cultural, moral, and social values…"[3] (translation mine). It has therefore been the attempt of this paper to initiate a conversation about queer artworks that barely escape censorship, and to understand what is it about deviant queer agencies that has threatened "our cultural, moral, and social values" (ibid.) that they need to be silenced and suppressed.

Donna McCormack in her seminal work, *Queer Postcolonial Narratives*, understands the queer postcolonial condition as a resilient response against neocolonial technologies. The (neo-) colonial space is essentially conceived as masculine (Hinchy 281), thus queer spaces and queer bodies signify and embody subversive postcolonial living. McCormack believes that "sexuality and gender are imbricated in the racialized colonization of bodies" (8) which suggests that a condition beyond colonialism cannot manifest itself unless bodies are not rethought

or reconfigured *queerly*. As Doderer argues, "the term LGBTQ not only represents a scope of different sexual orientations, but also summarizes very different political positions" (433), hence to be queer is to reimagine modes of communal and national living.

In *Chewing Gum*, Qandeel intrudes upon the sacred, domestic, private space, and challenges the structures of heternormativity that kept Mansoor and Sanam's marriage intact. *Chewing Gum* is essentially the story of Sanam's coming out of the closet of domesticity, and in the last scene as she leaves her husband, *Chewing Gum* is essentially reimagining an alternate living outside heteronormative codified structures. The elimination of the phallus not only dismantles patriarchy, but also introduces an alternate female imaginary which is built upon solidarity among women. Sanam and Qandeel, as two queer women, aren't merged into one; nor after leaving Mansoor, does Sanam undergo any transformation of character. Apart from the symbolic gesture of chewing gum, Sanam remains unchanged in the final scene as she walks up to Qandeel. In constructing two varying representations of womanhood, *Chewing Gum* suggests the heterogenous, and deeply subjective nature of gender identities. According to Butler, gender is performative, and the theatre of gender can incorporate multiple, often contradictory performances. She writes in her masterwork, *Gender Trouble*, that "*gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced" (24). Both Sanam and Qandeel perform queerness differently, and yet the narrative of the episode gives space for enunciation to both women, and constructs their womanhood independently of each other.

Qandeel's breaking into the domestic, private space is in the essence of constructing queer geographies, as Christopher Reed remarks that "queer space is […] the process of, literally, taking place, of claiming territory" (64). More than carving a separate space, the queer individual will take hold and seize upon existing heterosexist spaces and will seek to dismantle them. Qandeel claims Mansoor's house, and in the entire course of the episode, controls the dynamic of the domestic space. She is not seen inside Mansoor and Sanam's bedroom, but even through her absence, choreographs how their private space is lived, and limits their intimacy. It is suggested in the episode that Mansoor and Sanam had stopped having sex after Mansoor's affair with Qandeel began. Hence, Qandeel functions as a queer artist-figure who is at the center of the narrative, and who writes and furthers the action. By sleeping with Mansoor, she also affects

Mansoor's intimacy with Sanam, hence controlling the dynamic of their marital, private space.

It is only revealed later that sleeping with Mansoor was a tactful plan to weaken his marriage with Sanam, and to eventually give her a reason to walk out on him. Qandeel's performative heterosexuality enables her to seduce and later castrate masculine sexuality, thus not only claiming the domestic space which has always belonged to the patriarch, but refashioning domesticity itself by brining Sanam to a different queer space outside the home. It could be argued here that since she sleeps with a man, Qandeel is not a lesbian in the strict sense of the word. The word "lesbian" or any Urdu counterpart is not uttered once in the course of the episode, instead the word that is used is the Urdu, *"dost"* (friend), and so the intimacy between Qandeel and Sanam could merely be homoerotic than completely homosexual. They can also easily be read as bisexual women who have both slept with men than as lesbians. In Qandeel's case, she performs heterosexuality not for its own sake (she does not sleep with Mansoor because she is attracted to him) but for a strategic purpose. If Qandeel had fallen in love with Mansoor as well, a case could have been put in favor for her bisexuality, but there is no sexual attraction on her part, and she simply sleeps with him to get closer to his wife. This not only makes Qandeel a lesbian, but a highly dangerous one at that, because she is able to easily pass off as a heterosexual woman.

Lesbians are generally understood as butch women[4] in the Pakistani cultural imaginary just as gay men are imagined as effeminate. These are normative conceptions of what homosexuality looks like in everyday living, hence the term homonormativity[5] has also recently been coined. Gay masculine men, and feminine lesbians are anomalies because they go against stereotypes of homosexuality, and are also hard to recognize. A butch lesbian is easily identified through her masculine attire, but a femme has the visual aesthetic of a straight woman. She is then more of a threat because at one hand she embodies normative ideals of womanhood, but by being a lesbian, she also subverts that which she embodies. She cannot be identified as a lesbian culturally because she wears none of the identity markers associated stereotypically with lesbians (i.e. short hair, masculine attire, deep voices etc.). Furthermore, this makes it easy for her to seduce a man because femmes embody mainstream femininity: the way they dress, or talk is in accordance to mainstream expectations associated with women. But being a femme does not make her less of a lesbian. Now it could be argued on one hand that if she performs heterosexuality, her lesbianism is jeopardized, and she has

dismantled both hetero and homo identities. She then exists as an unnamable threat which is neither hetero nor homo, but which can perform any sexual role and gender identity to get what she wants to dismantle oppressive structures. Qandeel, then, exists in a third space which accommodates both hetero and homo identities, making her a queer woman, thus proving both hetero and homo identity-positions as highly unstable.

But it is my stance in this paper that Qandeel's performative heterosexuality does not take anything away from her lesbianism. What does make her doubly a threat is her femme identity. As it has been argued before, femmes use heterosexuality to dismantle it. Also, they not only subvert heterosexuality, but also normative conceptions of homosexuality as well. In the homonormative imaginary, femmes challenge mainstream ideas of lesbianism. Kristin Esterberg writes that butch/femme practices are "more fluid and loosely defined" (55), and Veronika Koller writes that butch/femme lesbians had been discriminated against within the lesbian community, and were not seen as proper lesbians at all till the 1990s with the emergence of queer theory (81). Butches and femmes have therefore been doubly discriminated against, which makes them doubly threatening and subversive. They not only remodel the heteronormative matrix (Halberstam, 101), but also help redefine the possibilities of lesbianism itself.

Alison Eves writes that femme identities usually function as "destabilizing [by] constituting [a] queer space through transgressive practices and gender performances" (492). Eves writes about femme identities that "their invisibility and ability to pass in heteronormative spaces" (493) makes them all the more dangerous and effective. For Eves "femme sexuality was described as transgressive because it is performed in lesbian space" (ibid.) i.e. femmes will dress up not for the male gaze, but for the gaze of another woman. Qandeel does use the codified 'vamp' persona to seduce Mansoor, but as we learn later, her performed heterosexuality was to win over Sanam instead of Mansoor. Eves therefore writes that femme is a "strong, sexual and even aggressive identity" (491). Femme lesbianism then becomes more than a sexual orientation. It becomes a political tool to disrupt the flow of masculine power in heteronormative communities.

Furthermore, where queer spaces are concerned, the final scene of the episode is shot outside the domestic space, in an almost idyllic setting. Interior camera shots in *Chewing Gum* are usually prefaced by shots of the sprawling metropolis suggesting the urban landscape of the cinematic,

fictional world. Sanam and Mansoor live inside the metropolis, and yet the final shot of Sanam going back to Qandeel does not have a similar prefatory shot of the city, nor does the camera-frame show much of the house exteriors. The absence of a recognizable urban structure from within the last frame suggests that this queer space which accommodates Sanam and Qandeel is anti-urban. Shots of skyscrapers in the beginning of the episode suggest phallic, capitalist power; a heteronormative matrix which regulates female sexuality to produce human labor for capitalist machineries. Foucault, in his seminal *History of Sexuality*, writes:

> "[A] country had to be populated if it hoped to be rich and powerful […] its future and its fortune were tied not only to the number and the uprightness of its citizens, to their marriage rules and family organization, but to the manner in which each individual made use of his sex" (26).

Foucault further writes on gardens as potential heterotopic spaces. In one respect, it is important that the final scene is shot *outside* the heteronormative and capitalist structure of the home, but the specific choice of a garden as being an essentially queer space that accommodates deviant female sexualities can be further understood in lieu of Foucault's understanding of the garden as "a sacred space […] a space that was like the navel, the center of the world […] a sort of microcosm […] where the world in its entirety achieved symbolic perfection" (Leach 334). For Foucault, "the garden is the smallest fragment of the world and, at the same time, represents its totality […] forming right from the remotest times a sort of felicitous and universal heterotopia" (ibid.). According to J. Cottrill, "either crisis or deviance of heternormativity creates heterotopias" (361). The garden, thus, becomes a perfect queer space which functions as an alternate geography that is not locatable within nationalist cartographies.

This creation of an anti-urban space goes against Judith Halberstam's understanding of viable queer spaces being ideally urban. Halberstam writes that "queer subcultures thrive in urban areas" (15). Similarly, Doderer writes that "city life broadens horizons and challenges dominant gender arrangements" (432). In this respect, *Chewing Gum* challenges normative understandings of queer spaces being ideally urban, as anti-urban spaces are usually understood as primitive and oppressive. What *Chewing Gum* thus does is reconfigure anti-urbanity as an alternative mode of living, and looks beyond urban geographies to agrarian spaces. It is this shift towards an unspoiled natural landscape which accommodates queerness, thus reversing the idea of queer identities being

unnatural. According to Foucault, the garden functions as a microcosm. Its opening up to a lesbian relationship which is nonreproductive not only symbolizes an alternate communal living, but is a threat to capitalistic modes of production. It is in this respect that Qandeel and Sanam embody queer postcoloniality as argued by McCormack as *Chewing Gum* essentially "examine[s] how livable lives are carved out for those subjected to familial and colonial violence through an attachment to both the family home and the nation state" (5). Lesbianism is an undeniable threat to the religious nationalism which formed the basis of countries like Pakistan. Not only does it eliminate the phallus as an undesired object, but also by being a nonreproductive sexual relation, it has the potential of threatening labor markets on which capitalist economies built themselves. Diane Richardson writes: "Lesbian feminists asserted that lesbianism is not simply a sexual practice but a way of life and political struggle—a challenge to the institution of heterosexuality. As Ti-Grace Atkinson put it, 'Feminism was the theory, lesbianism the practice" (Plummer 194).

Moreover, the title of the episode itself—*Chewing Gum*—is metaphoric of nonreproductive lesbianism, as the act of chewing gum does not lead to swallowing and ingestion. Gum is chewed for pleasure and thrown away; it therefore symbolizes the nonprocreative aspect of lesbianism, or what Muñoz has called "queer futurity"[6]. Lesbianism does not ensure futurity of the human species by being nonprocreative, and thus it remains a threat for capitalist labor markets. Moreover, Sanam in one scene says that Qandeel chews gum as if she is chewing on human bones. The act of chewing gum within the narrative is therefore seen as a destructive, volatile action. Her constant gum chewing becomes prophetic of the destruction she will wreck, and if her gum-smacking sounds just like grinding bones, then this analogy goes well with her treatment of Mansoor.

Richardson also writes in this vein that "analysis of lesbianism as more than a sexual preference, as a political choice, implie[s] a critique of heterosexuality as an institution" (ibid.). Lesbianism becomes "a form of resistance to […] the process whereby heterosexuality is instituted and maintained under conditions of male supremacy" (ibid.). The bones Qandeel is chewing therefore become the bones of the patriarchy.

Furthermore, even where lesbianism is concerned, *Chewing Gum* shows multiple embodiments of lesbian womanhood in both Sanam and Qandeel. Diane Richardson talks about the stereotypical portrayals of lesbians as either overly sexualised (Qandeel) or as passive and desexualised (Sanam). Though it is hard to find a common ground in

lesbian studies to effectively argue what exactly constitutes an empowered lesbian, and what exactly merits as an enabling representation of lesbian sexuality, but what constitutes the lesbian experience proper in much academic study constructs lesbianism along the experiences of white, upper-class, Western women. It has been previously argued that the femme lesbianism of Qandeel and Sanam goes against mainstream homonormative ideals of lesbianism. In this regard, *Chewing Gum* also refuses to construct its protagonists' sexuality along ideas of Western homonormativity. It could be argued that Sanam is not a lesbian *enough*, and so Anna Marie Smith's claim that such representation of lesbianness (as we have in Sanam) "constitutes the erasure of the very possibility of lesbian sexuality" as "it is structured in terms of a sexist conception of women's subjectivity: that women are, by nature, passive, moderate, nonassertive" (Plummer 207). It might be therefore difficult to champion Sanam as an assertive lesbian, but even though she is docile as compared to Qandeel, she nevertheless finds unique ways to express her sexuality. The interior camera shots of Sanam's home show several paintings of solitary women, and one specifically in her bedroom is of two women, one in a celebratory manner holding her *pallu*, with a smile of ecstasy across her face. According to Reed, the domestic space can be configured queerly by constructing "fantastic interiors" (69) which are signified through the array of paintings chosen by Sanam representing femininity and independent womanhood, since none of the paintings have a male figure in them. Whether it is Sanam's slow restructuring of the domestic interiors in terms of the paintings we see dotted around in the background, or her fortitude and judgement in seeing through Qandeel's complicated plan, Sanam does come off as an empowered lesbian, and complicates what lesbianism can look like. She does not wear Western clothes, and in her shalwar kameez, and perhaps even desexualised body language, does embody queer belonging. The idea that lesbianism, and contemporary queer theory, is a distinct Western phenomenon, and that LGBTQ identities in Pakistan can only be seen in neocolonial epistemic frames is debunked by the figure of Sanam, the shalwar-kameez wearing, Urdu-speaking humble housewife of a Pakistani home. Due to the absence of a Pakistan-specific queer theory in existence, Pakistani queer identities rely on Western schemas to be made legible, but they still challenge Western homonormativity. In the figure of Sanam, *Chewing Gum* successfully offers an alternative reading of lesbianism. Her subtle restructuring of the domestic sphere, and her ultimate defiance of Mansoor represents the expression of her lesbian sexuality. Sanam shows that an empowered lesbian does not have to look, dress, and speak a certain way to pass off as

empowered, and therefore, she functions as a unique Pakistani embodiment of lesbianism which complicates Western homonormativity.

The women of *Chewing Gum* not only chart lines of flight from oppressive private spaces, but reconfigure what it means to be queer women. In the Pakistani cultural imaginary, in which lesbians are usually imagined as manly women, Sanam and Qandeel represent alternate embodiments of lesbianism. Being femme increases the threat they pose to heternormativity since their femme identity enables them to infiltrate and consequently dismantle hegemonic structures more easily. *Chewing Gum*, therefore, is a politically subversive text which shows the ultimate threat lesbianism poses to established systems of heteropatriarchy.

**Conclusion:**

Celia Kitzinger writes that there has been a fueled debate regarding whether lesbianism does pose a threat to dominant social structures, and that there's always a concern that "private lives of individuals do not change the moral and social values and cannot hurt public health" (116). How political it is after all to be a lesbian? In the context of contemporary Pakistani sociopolitical milieu, it is without a doubt a very aggressive political stance, and just from the reception that *Chewing Gum* had after its airing, shows how unprepared Pakistani audience still is for portrayals of sexual others onscreen. For a homophobic society, visual representations become highly politically charged, and thus disagreeing with Kitzinger's concern, lesbianism in this context not only threatens dominant notions of female sexuality, but in time, can help communities revise their prejudices and unlearn epistemic strictures regarding homosexuality and queer identities. Eves believes that "lesbian discourse in specific social and spatial sites [can eventually have] destabilizing effects on heterosexual hegemony" (482) as made evident by Angeline Malik's *Chewing Gum*. If "normativity […] is so appealing and prominent (or dominant) because of the elastic commonalities it seems to create and keep in place" (McCormack 4), then queer communities offer not only alternate ways of bonding which can be extremely empowering, but alternate ways of relating to the nation-state, and helps reconceive a national imaginary that includes rather than occludes identities.

## Notes

1. This is a dialogue said by Mansoor in the episode concerning Qandeel, and it roughly translates to “such a vulgar woman!”.
2. The Urdu-language title translates roughly to “how many knots/ties are left” as the television anthology series primarily deals with family dynamics and interpersonal relations, and so the word “knots/ties” is used metaphorically to signify human relations.
3. ”PEMRA issues notice to Hum TV drama ‘Kitni Girhain Baki Hain’ for homosexual content”. *Dawn*. 20 Feb 2017. Accessed 15 May 2017. https://images.dawn.com/news/1177137
4. For a rewarding discussion on butch/femme lesbians, see Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), pp—96-96.
5. Lisa Duggan famously defined “homonormativity” in her 2003 book, *The Twilight of Equality*, as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency” (50).
6. See José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (New York University Press, 2009).

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