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## **The Bilingual Cinema of Pakistan**

### **Abstract**

*Starting from the independence of 1947, Pakistani cinema has gone through various transformations. These include the “golden era” of 1959 – 1977, the downfall of this cinema in the 1980s and 90s, and then the current “new wave” when this cinema industry is in the “revival” phase. In one of the most recent developments, among several others, it has started making a new genre of films that is bilingual. It is neither solely based on Urdu nor Punjabi but a mix of both Urdu and Punjabi languages. The current study focuses on this shift of language in cinema. It is based on the premise that the contemporary cinema of Pakistani uses the Punjabi Language as a tool for commercial as well as entertainment purposes. This new formula has helped Pakistani cinema attain not only huge commercial success but also develop a unique identity among South Asian cinemas. We also argue that this current use of language has distanced Pakistani films from the earlier Urdu and Punjabi language cinema of the country.*

Keywords: Bilingualism, Urdu, Punjabi, Pakistani Cinema, Dialect, South Asian Cinemas

### **Introduction**

The president of Pakistan, Arif Alvi, tweeted on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2018 from his personal twitter handle that, “I watched the movie جوانی پھر نہیں آئی [Jawani Phir Nahi Ani] yesterday. An excellent production. I am glad Pakistan [sic] cinema is catching up and creating good entertainment” (Alvi 2018). This acknowledgement from the president of the state reflects the changing nature and popularity of Pakistani cinema as well as the interest and support of the policymakers for the cinema in Pakistan. This popularity is a recent phenomenon whose credit goes to the establishment of multiplexes and the entry of new filmmakers who are continuously bringing unique creative content for its audience.

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Pakistani cinema, in its current state, is in a transition phase where it is not only doing new experiments but also attempting to establish its own unique identity. One such attempt is the use of bilingualism in the films, which is different from Bollywood or other South Asian cinemas. In the recent past, several movies have been produced which have relied on using a mix of Punjabi and Urdu languages. There is a long list of films that have adopted this method. These include *Zinda Bhaag* (Gaur and Nabi 2013), *Na Maloom Afrad* (Qureshi 2014), *Punjab Nahi Jaungi* (Beyg 2017) and *Teefa in Trouble* (Rahim 2018). There are, of course, other films that have been produced solely in Punjabi and Urdu languages which are not the focus of this study.

The current study argues that the new Pakistani popular cinema has shifted from its traditional approach to producing single language films. Instead, it relies on a bilingual approach in which the Punjabi language is mixed with Urdu to serve two primary purposes: firstly, it is used to represent the culture of Punjab province and represents the rural feudal class of Punjab Province. Secondly, it is also used to add humour in the film in order to gain more popularity. The following parts of this essay will discuss the current academic discourse on Pakistani cinema, followed by a discussion of the films to understand the bilingualism in the cinema.

Ali Nobil Ahmed has rightly argued that “histories of the film industry in Pakistan tend to follow a rubric laid out by the late documentarian and author Mushtaq Gazdar, whose descriptive account of the emergence of Urdu film production centres in Lahore, Karachi and Dhaka during the 1960s has become a sort of master narrative of cinematic events at the national level” (Ahmad 2016, 471). Most of the academic discourse on Pakistani cinema has focused on this ‘master narrative’ until recently when this cinema has received the due attention it deserves. Ali Nobil Ahmed<sup>i</sup>, Wajiha Raza Rizvi<sup>ii</sup>, Ali Khan, Ahmad Bilal, Iqbal Sevea are some of the names among others whose continued exploration of Pakistani cinema has opened new dimensions of this cinema which were previously unexplored. Iain Talbot and Tahir Kamran’s work on Lahore is also another study that has presented an excellent insight on the beginning of this Lahore based cinema industry (Talbot and Kamran 2017). The current research is also an attempt to focus on one of the less explored areas of this cinema and therefore, intends to add the use of a bilingual approach to the existing literature.

Pakistani cinema has many similarities with Indian popular cinema, which is because of their porous geographic, cultural and cinematic boundaries. It is also evident that “many Pakistanis still prefer to watch ‘Indian’ films over those supposedly in their own national language” (Ahmad 2016, 471). However, it is not the language that is the main reason for their preference for Indian cinema. Instead, Indian cinema built its audience in Pakistan during the late 80s and 90s when the Urdu cinema of Pakistan was going through severe difficulties in the era of General Zia. It was not just the Indian cinema that dominated the Pakistani market through the availability of pirated copies of all its films. It was also the time when Punjabi cinema in Pakistan also flourished. Punjabi language films particularly the “*Weshi Jutt*” style films, replaced Urdu films [and were] ... “emerged as the most lucrative films produced in Pakistan” (Sevea 2014, 130). Sevea notes that “the popularity of the character of Maula and the success of films such as *Weshi Jatt* and *Maula Jatt* established a new highly popular genre of films” (Sevea 2014, 131). This genre of Punjabi films has lost its popularity and has now been limited to a minority of audiences. However, what has changed now is the mix of this popular form of Punjabi language cinema with the contemporary Urdu language.

### **Research Methodology**

To explore this further, we use Textual Analysis as the methodology which has been widely used for film analysis. Alan McKee, in one of the foundation books on Textual analysis, explains that “when we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (McKee 2003, 1). In this case, this ‘text’ refers to films which McKee himself has explained. He states that “whenever we produce an *interpretation* of something’s *meaning* – a book, television program, film, magazine, T-shirt, or kilt, piece of furniture or ornament – we treat it as a text. A text is something that we make meaning from” (McKee 2003, 4). Therefore, the film in this context will be used as ‘text’, and we will analyze the language of this ‘text’ by using textual analysis methodology. The strength of this methodology is that it offers both contextual as well as content analysis. There were two possible ways of conducting current research. Firstly, there was the option of studying the audience and the reception of the film. However, this method has a major weakness that the results of this analysis do not fully cover all the possible outcomes. Textual Analysis, however, is a method that lets the researchers understand all the potential issues and analyze them. That is why we selected this methodology. Using this methodology, our focus, however, will mainly be on the language used in the chosen film. This process will not involve any coding. Instead, it will be based on the reading of the researchers and their interpretation of meanings of the text used in the film. We will also focus on the overall impact of the contents and reveal its possible interpretations and meanings. The output of these

results will also be in the descriptive form as per the nature of this methodology which ultimately aims at getting a better understanding of the text, its meaning and those factors that affect this meaning-making process.

### Discussion and Analysis

I selected *Punjab Nahi Jaungi* (Dir. Nadeem Baig, 2017) as the case study for mainly two reasons. Firstly, it is one of the most successful films in Pakistan, and secondly, it is a very recent film. Moreover, PNJ also received the Jury Special Award at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Film Festival in China. This was also the highest-grossing film of Pakistan until the release of *Jawani Phir Nahi Ani 2* (JPNA2) which broke previous box office records. These features of the film make it a good case study to understand the popularity, and for that matter, style of the film. Studying a popular and a recent film will not only help us understand the direction Pakistani cinema is taking but it will also help to predict the usefulness of the bilingual approach in cinema. In the following section, we attempt to explore these dimensions by discussing examples from the film.

*Punjab Nahi Jaungi* (PNJ) was released under the banner of ARY Films and Six Sigma Plus Production. ARY Films are owned by Salman Iqbal, who is also the CEO of ARY Digital Network which comprises several TV channels as well as ARY Films. In Pakistan, TV channels are one of the major producers of films such as ARY or GEO Films. Trailers of these films are first released on these channels and played so extensively that the information on the release of films have already reached a vast audience before their exhibition. This promotion has been beneficial for these films including PNJ.

PNJ's story is loosely based on the theme of 'Ishq'<sup>iii</sup> and the highly popular formula of a love triangle. At the beginning of the film, we see that the lead role Fawad Khagga (Humayun Saeed) goes to the tomb of Heer<sup>iv</sup> (a female character from folklores) and wishes to marry a girl who is like a Heer. Fawad gets a master's degree in political science which is celebrated as a huge event by his family, whereas the female lead actor Amal (Mehwish Hayat) has an Economics degree from London. Fawad appears to have a Punjabi accent that is very noticeable even when he speaks English. Other than these two, there is a third character of Durdana (Urwa Hocane) who intends to marry Fawad. After Fawad's firm persuasion and jumping from the second floor of the house, Amal agrees to marry him. However, things do not progress as Fawad had planned and a twist appears in the film when Fawad is seen cheating with her. After several efforts from Fawad, and several important segments of showing the change of role of men and women in the new Pakistani cinema, the film ends with a resolution when both Fawad and Amal get together and live happily afterward.

Throughout the film, we see the extensive use of Urdu and Punjabi. There are several instances when the language is Urdu, but the accent is Punjabi. Interestingly, both Urdu and Punjabi languages appear to have their obvious purpose which is very clear. For instance, Film starts with a long shot of a green village with a Punjabi song, '*Sab Akhanr Mat Khedeiye Baazi, Jiss Baazi which Hariye* (Translation: All say, do not bet on what ends in loss)' in the background. The song then continues with several shots showing the indigenous culture of Punjab province of Pakistan. In the second example, the dialogues between *Firdous Begum* (Saba Hameed) and *Jawad Khagga* (Waseem Abbas) demonstrate the use of Urdu and Punjabi accents again that ends when Firdous Begum wishes Jawad in English language but in Punjabi accent, 'have a nice day' who replies in Punjabi as, 'honr kithey' (Translation: how is that possible now?). The next scene starts with the same sentence showing a cultural exchange of embracing and greeting each other by saying, "*kee haal ne, kithey ho*" (Translation: how are you? Where have you been?) by two male guests followed by another dialogue between by two female guests who speak the following dialogues: Female guest 01: "*Barre dino baad milley ho Surrayya Jee. Waal Chithey hogye ne tumhare*" (Translation: Seeing you after a long time, you have got grey hair now) and guest 02 replies in the Urdu language, "*Nasreen tumhen bhi jhuryan par gyee hain*" (Translation: Nasreen You've got wrinkles too). The scene cuts to a third shot in which Durdana, while getting off from a car and after showing off her style, says, "*yeh kon hai jinhen murr k minoon nyee wekhiya, never mind*" (Translation: Who is he who did not even look at me, never mind!). For further examples, see Table 01.

PNJ is full of such instances where Urdu and Punjabi languages are used extensively. Arguably, one cannot label these as specifically Urdu or Punjabi dialogues. For instance, in the first example, a Punjabi song and various shots depicting the culture and location of Punjab are added in the film which not only sets the mood of the film, but they also indicate the specific usage of the language as well as representation of Punjabi culture in the film. The second example then shows the conversation in a mixed language which can neither be purely considered as Urdu nor Punjabi. The use of words '*kounr*' instead of '*kon*', '*pehchanra*' instead of '*pehchana*' or '*adhhey*' instead of '*aadhe*' is a deliberate attempt to merge the Urdu and Punjabi languages. Similarly, in the third example, the dialogue by Durdana '*yeh kon hai jinhen murr k minoon nyee wekhiya, never mind*' is half Urdu and Half Punjabi sentence that ends with English words – "never mind".

Apart from *PNJ*, and as mentioned earlier, other films have also adopted the same linguistic technique. One such notable example is *Zinda Bhaag* (dir. Meenu Gaur, Farjad Nabi; 2013), which is an internationally acclaimed film that gained immense popularity and scholarly attention. This film also adopted a bilingual approach and can be considered as one of the earlier films in post-2000 that relied on Urdu and Punjabi languages. However, *ZB* differs from *PNJ* slightly as this film does not mix Punjabi with the Urdu language instead of the dialogues in the film are either in Urdu or in the Punjabi language.

This use of the bilingual approach raises a question as to what are the factors that are involved in the decision making of using a bilingual approach? Or what aims does the director/s intend to achieve with this approach? When one looks at the box office gains, it is evident that all the films mentioned above that used the bilingual approach were box office hits. So, this technique that along with other cinematic tools has been commercially successful. One can infer that the success of these films can be considered as one of the significant factors for the use of this approach. However,

The mix of language is not only used for commercial purposes but it also represents two different classes of the society: Urdu is spoken by those who are from urban and educated class. The lead female character of *PNJ*, who is from Karachi and has graduated from a university in London, speaks the Urdu language whereas, the lead male character, who belongs to the rural feudal class, either uses Punjabi language or, if not, then Punjabi accent is very dominant in all his dialogues. The film also reflects that a Master degree in Jawad Khagga's family is so uncommon that, upon his return, a huge event is organized to celebrate his unprecedented achievement.

Moreover, these dialects are also associated with the mood of the film where Punjabi is used as a tool for humour whereas, Urdu is spoken in the events of seriousness. There is a context to this linkage between humour and Punjabi language. Stage Dramas are one of the popular genres in Pakistan which provided an alternative form of entertainment when Pakistani cinema was facing a decline in the late 1990s and 2000s. The stage dramas were mainly in Punjabi language and were a mix of B-class humour and provocative stage dances. This use of Punjabi language and its association with comedy not only relies on the context of the jokes but it has also set audiences' expectations who consider these comedy scenes as a good value for their money.

It is also important to question if the so-called *Punjabization* factor is at play in these movies. The argument that Punjab is the dominant province in Pakistan and has cultural and economic hegemony over other provinces has been often referred in various academic texts including one of the most significant studies on the topic – 'The Punjabization of Pakistan: Myth or Reality?' by Ian Talbot (Talbot 2002). Talbot discussed the political, social and geographical factors to assess the reality of *Punjabization* claim – a term that was first used by Yunas Samad (Samad 1996 cited in Talbot 2002:53). Talbot concludes in this essay that, "Punjab, it is clear, is by no means monolithic. The perception in the minority provinces is, however, is of a unified Punjabi political interest" (Talbot 2002, 61). The space limitation restricts this essay to discuss this thesis in detail here. However, this can be an important area to explore in future studies.

## **Conclusion**

This study focused on the use of a bilingual approach by the contemporary Pakistani cinema which, arguably, comes as part of the 'new wave' of Pakistani cinema. It attempted to understand how the popular Pakistani cinema uses Urdu and Punjabi language and what role this approach plays for the film. We found that the use of this approach is a technique that is a shift in the existing style of Pakistani cinema. This shift has started new conventions of this use of individual languages for different purposes. Urdu to advance the storyline and as a representation of urban educated class, whereas the use of Punjabi language represents the rural and feudal families which may or may not be educated. Similarly, we also observed that any scenes involve emotions and seriousness were mainly based on the Urdu language, whereas Punjabi was used as a tool to add humour in the films.

It is also important to mention here that other than using the bilingual method, these films also relied on the glamorous costumes, good storyline, impressive visuals and, as always, a working formula – which, in this case, was to rely on emotions. *PNJ* also added the formula of the love triangle which is a time-tested formula of Pakistani and Indian cinema. Combining this bilingual approach along with the formulae mentioned above, these films bring a change in the new cinema of Pakistan that we call the *Bilingual Cinema of Pakistan*.

The current study only focused on the films that were mainly made in Punjab province and mixed the languages of Urdu and Punjabi. However, the future studies can engage the films produced in other provinces of Pakistan such as Sindh, Balochistan, and KP to see if Sindhi, Balochi or Pushto languages have had the same usage as the Punjabi played in these films. Moreover, the idea of *Punjabization* in films discussed earlier in this essay can be further explored in future studies.

## **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Ali Nobil Ahmed has written several essays on Pakistani cinema. One of his essential articles to understand the Pakistani cinema is ‘Exploration into Pakistani Cinema: Introduction’. (Ahmad 2016)
- <sup>2</sup> Wajiha Raza Rizvi has made a significant contribution to Pakistani cinema. Her essay “The Decline of Pakistani Cinema: The Government, Pakistan Electronic Media Authority (PEMRA), and the Interjection of VCRs, Pirated DVDs, and Cable Channels” is an essential read for those who intend to explore the gradual decline of Pakistani cinema during different political and army regimes in Pakistan. See (Rizvi 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> The term ‘Ishq’ has been literally translated as ‘love’ in various dictionaries. However, the actual word in Urdu for love is ‘piyar’ which is different from ishq in terms of meaning and their interpretation. According to Urdu literature, Ishq is a higher form of love that requires sacrifices and in which the lover forgets his/her interests instead attempts to sacrifice all he or she has for their Ishq.
- <sup>4</sup> Heer is the character from a story of Waris Shah, who was killed with poison by her relative who did not want her to marry her lover Ranjha.

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Table 1: Dialogues Between Firdous Begum and Jawad Khagga in Film PNJ.

Characters	Dialogues	English Translation	Language/ Accent
Jawad Khagga	Ap Kounr Jee, Main Pechanra Naheen	who are you? I didn't recognize you	Lang.: Urdu & Punjabi Accent: Punjabi
Firdous Begum	Firdous Begum, Ap ki better half	Firdous Begum, your better half	Lang.: Urdu & English Accent: Punjabi

<i>Jawad Khagga</i>	Bohat he haseen lag rye ho. Lo ager bolti na na toh mainre nahen pehchanra tha.	You look beautiful. Had you not spoken, I would not have recognized you.	Lang.: Mainly Urdu Accent: Punjabi
<i>Firdous Begum</i>	Haan haan who toh pata he hai mujhe. Kidher ja rye ho.	Yes, I know. Where are you going?	Lang.: Urdu Accent: Punjabi
<i>Jawad Khagga</i>	Apna mobile lene ja raha hoon, side table ki daraz main rakha hai	I am going to get my mobile phone. It is in the drawer of the side table	Lang.: Urdu Accent: Punjabi
<i>Firdous Begum</i>	Ab nyee rakha, ab mere bag main rakha hai. Adhey message parh liye hain maine. Baqi k adhey parhwa liye hain. Joh aane wale message hain woh phupha jee parhen gen. main baith ke sunoon gee.	Not now, it is now in my bag. I've read half of the messages myself and the other half by others. Uncle will read the upcoming messages while I'll listen.	Lang.: Urdu & Punjabi. Accent: Punjabi