



Complexities of the Collective: An Analysis of Feminist Resistance in Asim Abbasi's *Churails*

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Complexités du collectif : Analyse de la résistance féminine dans *Churails* d'Assim Abbasi

Résumé

Cet article vise à explorer les complexités de la résistance collective féministe dans la web-série d'Asim Abbasi, *Churails*. Traduite approximativement comme « sorcières », *Churails* est une web-série pakistanaise diffusée sur ZEE5, une plateforme OTT indienne appartenant à Zee Entertainment Enterprises et raconte l'histoire d'un groupe de femmes transgressives qui s'associent pour créer une agence de détectives sous la forme d'une boutique exclusivement destinée aux clients féminins. L'entreprise de femmes ainsi créée planifie et met en œuvre une résistance collective contre les idéologies patriarcales, l'exploitation du genre et la violence sexuelle, l'infidélité conjugale et/ou la violence domestique en fonction de la nature de la souffrance des clientes. Ce texte a pour but d'examiner les subtilités de la conscience agentielle apparemment collective atteinte par les femmes de l'agence de détectives malgré les différences de classe, de sexualité et de milieu social. Cela implique une analyse de l'intersection de la classe, du genre et de la sexualité, afin de décortiquer les lacunes, les fissures et les absences dans la conscience collective féministe proposée par la web-série. Enfin, l'article entend repérer les possibilités d'aborder ces fissures afin de parvenir à un point de vue politique pour soutenir la résistance collective contre les structures patriarcales du pouvoir. Le texte utilise une méthodologie théorique et analytique les concepts théoriques relatifs au genre, à la sexualité, à la résistance et à la marginalisation entre en jeu. L'article intègre également des références intertextuelles à des textes littéraires secondaires qui traitent de questions semblables à celles de la web-série afin d'enrichir l'analyse du texte primaire.

Mots-clés : féminisme, résistance, genre, sexualité, classe, marginalisation

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the complexities of collective feminist resistance in Asim Abbasi's web-series, *Churails*. Loosely translated as 'witches', *Churails* is a Pakistani web-

series released through ZEE5, an Indian OTT platform owned by the Zee Entertainment Enterprises. The web-series is about a group of transgressive women who join hands in order to start a detective agency in the garb of a boutique exclusively meant for female clients. The enterprise of women thus created plans and implements a collective resistance against patriarchal ideologies, gendered and sexual exploitation, marital infidelity, and/ or domestic violence based on the nature of the clients' suffering. The paper aims to examine the intricacies of the seemingly collective agential consciousness achieved by the women at the detective agency despite differences of class, sexuality, and social background. This entails an analysis of the intersection of class, gender, and sexuality, as a means to unpack the gaps, fissures, and absences in the collective feminist consciousness proposed by the web-series. The paper finally intends to locate possibilities for addressing these fissures in order to arrive at a political standpoint for sustaining collective resistance against patriarchal structures of power. The paper uses a theoretical and analytical methodology. This involves an engagement with theoretical concepts pertaining to feminism, sexuality, resistance, and marginalisation. One refers to the analyses of critical thinkers such as Sharmila Rege, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Rebecca Raby, and Gayle Rubin. The theoretical postulations are tested by a close textual examination of *Churails*. The paper further weaves in intertextual references to secondary literary texts that engage with similar concerns as the web-series in order to enrich the analysis of the primary text.

Keywords: feminism, resistance, gender, sexuality, class, marginalisation

Introduction

*Maybe there is a country
where all of us live,
all of us freaks
who aren't able to give
our loyalty to fat old fools,
the crooks and thugs
who wear the uniform
that gives them the right
to wave a flag,
puff out their chests,
put their feet on our necks,
and break their own rules.*

*But from where we are
it doesn't look like a country,
it's more like the cracks
that grow between borders
behind their backs.
That's where I live.
And I'll be happy to say,*

*'I never learned your customs.
I don't remember your language
or know your ways.
I must be
from another country.'* (Dharker, 2022: n.p.)

Imtiaz Dharker's well known poem , "They'll Say: She Must Be From Another Country", uses the analogy of a country to conceive of a community of resistant women, such as the speaker (and, perhaps the poet), who belong to the non-western, postcolonial, Third World, as it were, and have spent a lifetime of negotiating with categories of religion, race, sexuality, class, and gender in order to devise their politics of resistance, even as some of them continue to transit between the Eastern and the Western world for their livelihood. This analogy of a country works simultaneously as a means of exclusion, and a space of collective belonging in the poem, an interplay that remains aporetically fluid even towards the end of the poem thereby foregrounding a significant conflict at the heart of Third World, subaltern feminism: forging collective belonging while grappling with the category of difference. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her analysis of Third World Feminisms, uses a similar analogy of 'imagined communities' borrowed from Benedict Anderson, as a political position to explore the perpetually fluid and transitional nature of the belonging that may be forged between women from diverse Third World contexts on the basis of "the way we think about race, class, and gender - the political links *we choose to make* among and between struggles" (Mohanty, 46: 2003) [emphasis mine]. However, the very category of the Third World, its engagement with the concept of feminism, as well as the tentative sense of collective belonging potentially achieved on the two former bases need to be constantly interrogated, and problematised, according to Mohanty, for "[a]lliances and divisions of class, religion, sexuality, and history, for instance, are necessarily internal to each of the above groups. Second, ideological differences in understandings of the social mediate any assumption of a natural bond between women" (Mohanty, 49: 2003).

Undoubtedly, thus, the category of 'difference' has been a crucial contribution of the scholarship on feminism and gender from the Third World, for it foregrounds the need for an intersectional analysis of gendered

oppression, one that takes into account the interaction of gender with frameworks of colonisation, class, caste, race, and community. However, one attempts to foreground critical thinkers, such as Sharmila Rege too, who have considered the pitfalls of the framework of 'difference' that may, in certain contexts, develop into the position of nominalism leading to narrow identitarian politics. Rege, in her conceptualisation of a Dalit Feminist Standpoint, speaks of the relative exclusion or erasure of the Dalit woman in the differential identity politics of the Dalit Panther Movement in the 1970s as well as the autonomous women's groups, and left party-based women's organisations in the 1980s and 1990s:

The Left party based women's organisations made significant contribution towards economic and work-related issues as the autonomous women's groups politicised and made public the issue of violence against women. Serious debates on class v/s patriarchies emerged, both parties however did not address the issues of brahmanism. While for the former 'caste' was contained in class, for the latter the notion of sisterhood was pivotal. All women came to be conceived as 'victims' and therefore 'dalit'; so that what results is a classical exclusion. All 'dalits' are assumed to be males and all women 'savarna'. It may be argued that categories of experience and personal politics were at the core of the epistemology and politics of the Dalit Panther Movement and the women's movement (Rege, 1998: 42).

Given this context of the marginalisation of the Dalit women (and their oppression owing to an intersection of caste and gender) from mainstream feminist and Dalit debates and insurgencies of the 1970s-90s, Rege argues in favour of working towards conceptualising a possible interface between diverse social groups. Such a process involving an effort of mainstream social groups towards critical engagement with the histories of the struggles of the subaltern may eventually bring about a change in the subjectivities of these diverse mainstream groups and "a transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause'" (Rege, 1998: 45), as it were. Mohanty on the basis of an analysis of Jodi Dean's concept of solidarity, and Bernice Johnson Reagon's concept of coalition, proposes similar frameworks to arrive at a potential collective feminist resistant consciousness in the face of the heterogeneity of contexts that otherwise continue to emerge for women in the Third World. As Mohanty contends, "I do not posit any homogeneous configuration of Third World women who form communities because they share a "gender" or a "race" or a "nation." As history (and recent feminist

scholarship) teaches us, "races" and "nations" haven't been defined on the basis of inherent, natural characteristics; nor can we define "gender" in any transhistorical, unitary way" (Mohanty, 2003: 47).

It is in this complex backdrop concerning the need for and the subsequent difficulties in forging a collective gendered consciousness in the Third World context, Asim Abbasi's *Churails* presents the prospect of such a collective feminist resistance that seemingly cuts across the lines of class, social background, and, perhaps, sexuality.

Churails is a Pakistani web series exclusively created for *Zindagi TV*, an Indian entertainment channel owned by the Zee Entertainment Enterprises. It was released on ZEE's OTT platform, ZEE5 in 2020. The web-series is set in present-day Karachi, Pakistan, and is about a group of four women, who decide to run an exclusive detective agency for female clients in the garb of a boutique in order to help women from various economic strata counter instances of infidelity in marriage, domestic violence, and other forms of gendered exploitation. The four female protagonists and founders of the agency consist of Sara Jamil, a non-practicing family-lawyer, and wife of a politician; Jugnu Chaudhary, an event planner and a divorcee; Zubeida, a college student, who is also a boxer; and Batool, Jugnu's full-time help, and an ex-convict, imprisoned for the murder of her sexually-abusive husband. While Sara and Jugnu belong to elite circles of Karachi society living in gated mansions possibly on the Southern side of Clifton, Zubeida and Batool belong to a lower economic stratum residing in a tenement akin to a Chawl situated in the poorer section of the city.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first section focusses on the initial episodes of *Churails*, and delves into the specifics of the inception of the women's collective in the web-series. This entails an examination of the conditions that necessitate the coming together of a motley group of women, and a transgender for a supposedly common cause. One further analyses the productive potential of such a motley group that, albeit simplistic and tentative to begin with, is a means for a preliminary politicisation of a diverse set of individuals with regards to the fundamentals of gendered exploitation and patriarchal ideology. The second section of the paper analyses the irruption of difference and disruption into the hitherto formed feminist collective leading to the need for locating possibilities to

sustain the collective belonging despite the recognition of otherness within. Intersections of gender with class and sexuality that become sufficiently pronounced as the web-series progresses are analysed in this section. The paper uses Rebecca Raby's analysis on the modernist and postmodernist conceptions of resistance to differentiate between the agential consciousness of the group of women at the beginning of the series, and its gradual transformation towards the middle and the end.

1. Universal Sisterhood of *Churails*

Churails begins with the premise of a feminist collective formed on the basis of a strategic collaboration of four female protagonists, who come together under exceptional circumstances, gathering in Jugnu Chaudhry's living room, on a particular night to deliberate on various forms of violence and exploitation faced by women of different social backgrounds including them. While the audience is forced to ponder over the simplistic nature of this universal sisterhood, as it were, since the female protagonists belong to rather diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and cannot possibly have similar indices of exploitation, the web-series constructs a spatial and narrative context for strategically facilitating the supposed alliance of the protagonists. Batool, Jugnu's full-time help brings in her neighbour, Zubeida, with her to Jugnu's house, after rescuing Zubeida from being beaten by her father for pursuing boxing. Sara Jamil, who is Jugnu's friend, comes to her house, incensed, after having found out about her husband's sexual licentiousness and infidelity. Jugnu's living room functions as a spatial refuge for the women, a room of their own, as it were, uninterrupted by male interference or familial influence given Jugnu's divorce and relative financial independence. In this tentative, transitional moment, three distraught women, out of four, are able to articulate a common consciousness of hurt, defeat, and exploitation at the hands of menfolk in their respective families. While Sara Jamil speaks of a recent experience of marital betrayal connecting it to similar instances of infidelity that upper class wives have to tolerate or grapple with, Batool is reminded of domestic and sexual abuse inflicted on her by her husband in the past. Zubeida, moreover, has barely recovered from instances of gender bias, exploitation, and violence in her

family. The nature of subjugation may be different in these cases; however, based on Sara's analysis of each of their situations, the protagonists arrive at an uncomplicated, and clear recognition of men as the common antagonists of all women in a patriarchal society such as theirs. Comparing themselves to 'mannequins', the protagonists begin by attempting to decipher the workings of patriarchy that confers on men not only a higher socio-economic status in society, but also the right to subjugate women on the basis of the concept of 'honour'.

The naivete of this supposedly collective gendered consciousness, enabled in the first episode of *Churails*, through an unplanned, informal conversation between the four protagonists in a cloistered space, as it were, may be viewed in the light of the concept of universal sisterhood, or "an ahistorical notion of the sameness of [women's] oppression and, consequently, the sameness of their struggles" (Mohanty, 2003: 112). Mohanty critiques Morgan's conception of Universal Sisterhood on the basis of its assumption of women as a homogenous group across cultures, and nations, entirely on the basis of the common condition of patriarchal suffering and oppression: "Thus in Morgan's text cross-cultural comparisons are based on the assumption of the singularity and homogeneity of women as a group... predicated on a definition of the experience of oppression where difference can only be understood as male/female. Morgan assumes universal sisterhood on the basis of women's shared opposition to androcentrism, an opposition that, according to her, grows directly out of women's shared status as its victims" (112). In *Churails*, however, the inceptive development of a universal sisterhood between four diverse protagonists, based on the facile understanding of patriarchal oppression, which is supposedly a common condition for all women irrespective of class, race, caste, and ethnicity, serves the basic purpose of mobilisation of women. The initial mobilisation is that of the protagonists who are provided a sense of "homogeneity and an awareness of [their] own function" (Gramsci, 2009: 77) on the basis of Sara's exploration of various forms of gendered exploitation encountered by women in their society and the need for it to be countered by a unified format of resistance, such as opening a detective agency that covertly reaches out to upper class wives grappling with marital infidelity, as well as lower class women grappling with violence

and abuse on a routine basis. In the second episode, the four founders further appoint and mobilise a diverse group of women and a transgender from different socio-economic backgrounds as employees on the basis of their sleuthing skills (technical knowledge; hacking skill; physical strength; pick-pocketing skills; skills of honey-trapping among others). This mobilisation that has been predominantly forged on the practical basis of the employees' need for money eventually becomes productive of a fairly singular agential consciousness to transform the status quo of power relations between men and women in society.

The conceptualisation of power and resistance in the web-series at this point of the inception of the detective agency may be viewed in the modernist framework of resistance as explained by Rebecca Raby. The modernist conception of resistance, according to her, is marked by a relatively clear locus of power, such as, the State, which operates through means of both repression and ideology, and a relatively unified agential consciousness in the subjugated arising from their sense of humanism: "The subject is whole, with a clear position in relation to domination, rather than fragmented, and thus has a clear source of agency, and of morality" (Raby, 2005: 155). Conceiving of power relations in terms of a binary opposition between "dominance and submission – power is something that is possessed by the dominant group and wielded against the subordinate" (Raby, 2005: 152), the founders of the detective agency in *Churails*, thus, initiate a wave of specific, resistant actions that are aimed at empowering women by punishing men for their oppressive acts, as specified by their slogan: 'men will suffer pain'.

The earliest clients taken on board are upper class women, who are victims of infidelity. They are provided with substantial legal evidence against their husbands if the accusation is confirmed after thorough undercover work. In a gradual progression, women clients from lower economic sections, who are victims of violence, are reached out to either through direct support based on a phone call from the victim (a group of burqa-clad, physically strong female employees visit the victim's house to confront or threaten the man in question), or indirectly in public-spaces (burqa-clad female employees stationed in market-places to distribute free pepper-sprays, fake-guns, and whistles). The latter example of burqa-clad

female employees being scattered throughout market-places to reach out to other women is particularly relevant in the context of Pakistan, for it is illustrative of similar on-ground attempts of female collectives such as ‘Girls at Dhabas’¹ in Karachi, and other parts of Pakistan to reclaim public spaces that are considered off-limits for women. Mansoor Raza explains,

In Karachi, the fight for public spaces by women is particularly acute. Poor lighting, a dearth of public restrooms and a chilling lack of security cast long shadows over women’s experiences... public spaces are designed to satiate the appetite of the dominant groups. ... women fear venturing out after dark, where public transportation is a minefield of harassment and where parks are off-limits due to the constant threat of unwanted attention. [...] The lack of safe and accessible public spaces limits their mobility, restricts their economic opportunities and undermines their overall well-being (Raza, 2024: n.p.)

Apart from on-ground activism, the protagonists in *Churails* further assist in foregrounding archaic ideological tropes, rituals and practices that prescribe conventionally appropriate gender behaviour. Sara Jamil, for instance, helps unpack the dominant patriarchal concept of the ‘*naik-parveen*’ or the pious, righteous woman, an unreasonable standard of hegemonic femininity for the elite women to aspire towards. The concept of the ‘*naik-parveen*’ derived from the ideology of respectability may have its roots in the history of colonisation, and the European definition of the proper lady, which eventually became a means of class stratification even in the colonies. Tharu and Lalitha elaborate on the “process of class differentiation, on the basis of (among other things) redefined sexual mores for women, [that] had taken place in Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the new bourgeoisie inscribed its identity on the bodies and souls of women and the proper lady was born” (Tharu and Lalitha, 1991: 8). They contend that even in colonial Indian context over the nineteenth century, this ideology of respectability was a means of setting the women from the emerging middle classes “in counterpoint to the ‘crude and licentious’ behaviour of the lower-class women. *Decent* (middle-class)

¹ “Girls at Dhabas” is a collective feminist initiative in different cities of Pakistan raising awareness and conversations about women’s disappearance from public spaces in Pakistan, and the need for them to reclaim these spaces. Initially having started as an online campaign through social media, “Girls at Dhabas” now contributes to a range of on-ground activism in the form of all-women bike rallies, women’s marches etc. in different cities of Pakistan.

women were warned against unseemly interaction with lower-class women...” (8) [emphasis mine].

Saadia Ahmed in her analysis on the ‘*naik parveen* syndrome’ in present-day Pakistan applies it to a community of delusional wives, “honoured’ to be married” (Ahmed 2014: n.p.), who collectively engage in certain recognisable, patriarchal rituals such as toiling for the husband, taking his word in all decisions, and being blind to his flaws, “a ‘role model’ for those who are not so accomplished at being the ‘perfect wives’” (n.p.). In Ahmed’s analysis too, the class-consciousness of this community of women being spoken of cannot be ignored, and is evidenced in their obsession with accessories or the material paraphernalia of an upper-middle class wifehood: “yellow gota-covered *dupattas* and henna-dyed hands made way for ruby red *ghararas* (bridal dress) and *maatha pattis* (bridal head adornments)” (n.p.). In the third episode of *Churails*, when an elite female client presents a case of her husband’s supposed infidelity, she goes out of her way to justify his behaviour as a temporary slippage caused by the so-called predatory ways of the secretary. Sara Jamil terms the client’s behaviour as a manifestation of the ‘*pati-parmeshwar*’ (husband-god) complex that initiates a castigation of (lower/ working class) women by (upper-middle class) women in order to “stay silent on questions which threaten to take [the ideology] beyond [its] boundaries” (Storey, 2009: 72) such as the question of the husband’s autonomous decision to cheat on the wife. This instance is interestingly reminiscent of similar binaries of respectability and crudeness drawn in Ismat Chughtai’s short story, “The Profession”, in which an upper-middle class protagonist expresses an internalised disdain towards sex-workers whom she morally castigates on the basis of their sexual expression, and the supposed ability to seduce the husbands or fathers of “pure, chaste and noble” (Chughtai, 1995: 63) upper-middle class women such as herself. Pitiably, the protagonist is unable to read into the hypocrisy of upper-middle class patriarchy that ascertains the moral superiority of upper-middle class women on the basis of their sexual restraint but sanctions male sexual licentiousness as a naturalised outcome of the presumed virility of dominant upper-middle class masculinity:

Oh this serpent, who knows how many would be bitten by her; who knows how many victims she would put in her hunting bag. A woman is

usually jealous of other women for no reason, but God save us all from a prostitute! A woman gets her share, that is a man from the market and then moves on, but no escape from a prostitute (Chughtai, 1995: 66).

In *Churails* too, after Sara's team of detectives prove the client's husband guilty of pressurising his secretary for sexual favours, based on evidence, the client, unable to see her illusion of the 'sexually licentious secretary' shatter, rebukes the employees at the detective agency calling them hell-bound family-wreckers.

The intersection of class and gender in the aforementioned ideology aligns with Sara Jamil's ability to read into the intricacies of hegemonic femininity given that she too was subject to similar ideological practices at an earlier point in her marriage. For instance, the fifth episode of *Churails* uses intercutting and flashbacks to reveal Sara's past, when her husband was involved in a case of sexual harassment lodged by a woman from a lower economic stratum. Being in the subject position of a '*naik parveen*' upper-class deluded wife then, Sara, who was also pregnant, had gathered substantial evidence to support the husband, confidently concluding that he was being framed, and had confronted the victim commanding her to retreat without probing further into the case. She is painfully reminded of this instance as the boutique-cum-detective agency is being attacked by the media, the police, and the common public on suspicion of the employees instigating a woman client to murder her husband. While she, and her founder colleagues are transported to the safety of their homes in cars with security guards, the employees at the lower rung are left to deal with unprecedented violence and vandalism at the establishment on their own. This sudden moment of fissure in the supposedly collective belonging of women at the detective agency brings to surface the inevitable intersection of class and gender, implicating Sara in the exploitation of the very women she has been attempting to protect. Furthermore, this moment shifts the promise of collective agential consciousness hitherto staged in *Churails* to the postmodernist conceptual framework in which the resisting subject is viewed as "produced, fragmented, always changing and often contradictory. While the subject is not unitary and discourses are not always 'driven by material forces', discourses and specific historical locations produce people as certain kinds of subjects" (Raby, 2005: 162). For instance, after the violent

attack at the detective agency, which proves fatal for two of her employees, Sara freezes into inaction for six weeks even as her agential consciousness is challenged by her class-situatedness, which makes her infer that she cannot continue to speak for and on-behalf of all women if she does not have the same indices of exploitation and suffering as them. The next section analyses in detail the fissures in the collective feminist resistance as seen in *Churails*.

2. From Sisterhood to Coalition

In her analysis on Reagon's concept of coalition, Mohanty differentiates it from sisterhood on the basis of the former's reliance on survival as a basis of its formation instead of a notion of shared oppression. "You don't go into coalition because you like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive" (Reagon, 1983: 357). This section analyses the gradual transition of the collective feminist consciousness in *Churails* from an assumed commonality of patriarchal oppression to the eventual acceptance of difference, and the need to sustain the collective engagement in the face of and despite an awareness of intersectional and perhaps contradictory frameworks of gendered exploitation faced by different members on account of their class, ethnicity, location, and sexuality.

Churails foregrounds two distinct concepts that threaten the continuity of the collective of women at the detective agency: class and sexual orientation.

The first instance that complicates the singular, unified agential consciousness of the collective on the basis of an intersection of class, geographical location, and gender is seen in the third episode, when one of the employees, Shakeela Siddiqui or Sheila, asks for Sara's help as a lawyer in resolving the case of her mother's supposed murder in Hyderabad, Sindh, by a money-lending contractor during an altercation between the contractor and their family regarding the repayment of loan. Although reluctant initially, Sara is forced to take the case because majority of the employees, including Jugnu and Batool, vote in favour of it.

In the conversations with the family, however, it is revealed that Sheila's mother actually machinated her own suicide, taking her disabled husband in confidence, after an abusive altercation with the contractor. This decision is taken by Sheila's mother in the context of her husband's disability, which implies a lifetime of bonded labour for their daughters in a bangle factory in order to repay the contractor's loan, and the fear of his constant threats or the grim possibility of sexual violence against the daughters. Initially appalled by the lie, and the ethically questionable nature of pressing legal charges against an innocent contractor, Sara declines her support to Sheila's family. However, after a visit to the bangle factory, both Sara and Jugnu are forced to confront alternate coordinates of exploitation for lower-class women such as Sheila based on both gender and the localised practices of exploitation, such as illegal money-lending that may function on the principle of bonded labour. Khan and Bhasin explain about the difficulties in conceptualising feminism and gender resistance in South Asian societies where the very locus of patriarchal power is rendered fragmented by the existence of multiple patriarchies on the basis of the social stratifications of class and caste:

... it is not enough to simply ask for a woman's equality vis-à-vis the men in her community ... it does not take a peasant woman very far even if she becomes equal to a peasant man who is himself brutalised, exploited and oppressed by society. Feminists, therefore, are not only fighting for the "equality" of women, but for a just and equitable society – for women and men both (Bhasin and Khan, 2005: 6).

This instance further provides a brief insight into the Manichean, and colonial division of space of the postcolonial nations that continues for many years after the decolonisation process leading to an uneven pace of economic development of the rural and urban centres. As Fanon explains in his essay, "Pitfalls of National Consciousness":

We know that colonial domination has marked certain regions out for privilege. [...] [Colonialism] contents itself with bringing to light the natural resources, which it extracts, and exports to meet the needs of the mother country's industries, thereby allowing certain sectors of the colony to become relatively rich. But the rest of the colony follows its path of underdevelopment and poverty, or at all events sinks into it more deeply. Immediately after independence, the nationals who live in the more prosperous regions realize their good luck, and show a primary and profound reaction in refusing to feed

the other nationals. [...] The nationals of these rich regions look upon the others with hatred, and find in them envy and covetousness, and homicidal impulses (Fanon, 1963: 158-159).

The colonial patterns of spatial demarcation that continue to exist post decolonisation render it necessary for natives in the underdeveloped rural areas to migrate to urban centres for better economic opportunities, as is the case with Sheila, who migrates to Karachi to escape the fate of bonded labour, and for better job prospects. Not entirely convinced by the somewhat slanted approach to Sheila's situation, Sara Jamil nonetheless threatens and eventually convinces the landlord to accept an out-of-court settlement releasing Sheila's family of the bonded labour, and securing for them a financial compensation for a fresh start.

Sara's class-consciousness, and perhaps, a neo-colonial view towards individuals from the rural areas is revealed, however, in her decision to sever ties with Sheila, and end her services as an employee of the detective agency following this incident because she continues to judge Sheila's lie regarding her mother's suicide as morally questionable. By trying to separate herself from the discomforting and supposedly immoral, unruly, and dangerous world of Sheila, Sara relinquishes all responsibility toward women such as Sheila, who do not belong to the same urban social circle, and class as her. This willed act of separation perhaps also derives from Sara's belief that she cannot experientially belong with the women from lower economic stratum, and that the fortifications of her class are too secure to let this world of suffering and exploitation barge into her own. This act of allowing the category of difference to intervene into a collective feminist standpoint is an error of judgement that Rege warns against, for subjectivities can be transformed on the basis of the effort of the privileged individuals in "educating themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and utopias and the struggles of the marginalised" (Rege, 1998: 45).

This is an effort Sara is eventually forced to make at a later point in the web-series when Sheila goes missing, and her family contacts Sara once again with a hope for support. Sara is compelled to rethink her role as the initiating agent of the detective agency, which even though was primarily a consequence of her personal vendetta against her husband's infidelity, and

was a means to predominantly reach out to upper class wives grappling with cheating husbands, has to eventually go beyond the narrow framework of her class, and engage with varied spectrums of exploitation of women. This may render Sara's resistant consciousness "dynamic, multiple and hailed by (and respond[ing] to) conflicting discourses" (Raby, 2005: 167), since she does not exactly suffer as and with the women from the marginalised sections. However, Sara's decision to eventually re-join the detective agency as a means to create an interface between women such as her, and those such as Sheila, may still pave way towards a hybrid possibility of stepping "outside of discourse ... to locate new ways of thinking and behaving" (167). The decision further aligns with Reagon's politics of engagement or a coalition's survival on the basis of the members going beyond their narrow identities and selves. She explains,

If you analyze the situation properly, you will know that there might be a few things you can do in your personal, individual interest so that you can experience and enjoy change. But most of the things that you do, if you do them right, are for people who live long after you are forgotten. That will happen if you give it away... The only way you can take yourself seriously is if you can throw yourself into the next period beyond your little meager human-body-mouth-talking all the time (Reagon, 1983: 365).

Sara's decision, thus, to help find her ex-employee along with her colleagues works as an example of the broadening of one's agential consciousness on the basis of a willed engagement with the lives and sufferings of women from a different social background, and marks a possible path towards turning 'difference' into a political standpoint, as is also suggested by Rege.

The subsequent fissure in the women's collective in *Churails* on the basis of sexuality adds another dimension to the complexity of feminist resistance staged in the web-series. Gayle Rubin in her essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality", indicates the limitations of feminism with regards to the concept of sexuality. Rubin specifically refers to the feminist tendency that considers "sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege. This tradition resonates with conservative, anti-sexual discourse" (Rubin, 1999: 165), and censures queer relationships on the basis of their anti-heterosexual, experimental, fluid approach to sexuality, desire, and companionship. In *Churails*, despite the

potential inclusivity of the motley group of employees consisting of a transgender, and a lesbian couple, the fissure based on sexuality is evidenced in the fourth episode that creates a complex intersection of gender, class, and sexuality.

The episode focuses on another upper-class wife, Shehnaz Khalid, suspecting her husband, Ehtisham Khalid, of infidelity. In the course of the search, however, Ehtisham is found to be a closeted queer person, who steps out on weekends to spend quality time with another queer man belonging to the lower economic stratum. While Baby Doll, the transgender employee, who is friends with Ehtisham's companion, succeeds in convincing Jugnu, Sara, and other colleagues to stall the search and abort the case, Batool intervenes into the case. Harboursing vengeance and hatred towards the upper-class foster family that adopted her daughter after Batool was imprisoned, but could not take care of the daughter who went missing at the age of fifteen, Batool sublimates this hatred into causing Shehnaz catch Ehtisham red handed in a hotel-room and eventually murder him for his transgressive act. While Batool's intervention initially seems to emanate from a kneejerk reaction to a feeling of helpless dispossession against those belonging to the upper class, her act of encouraging Shehnaz to punish Ehtisham, based on a comparison between his queer sexuality and Batool's own husband's sexual abuse, is indicative of a possible orthodoxy of approach with regards to sexual experimentation and transgression. Moreover, the fact that Batool's actions, even though criticised, are not sufficiently problematised in the web-series, since Sara, Jugnu, and Zubeida eventually reconcile with her, renders the principle of inclusivity at the agency seem questionable, since the marginalisation and/ or exploitation of queer individuals seems secondary to the cause of women's emancipation. Rubin emphasises the limits of the feminist framework of gender that operates on the basis of the fixity of sexes with regards to the wantonness and fluidity of sexual desires and identities:

Feminism is the theory of gender oppression. To assume automatically that this makes it the theory of sexual oppression is to fail to distinguish between gender, on the one hand, and erotic desire, on the other. In the English language, the word 'sex' has two very different meanings. It means gender and gender identity, as in 'the female sex' or 'the male sex'. But sex also refers to sexual activity, lust, intercourse, and arousal, as in 'to have sex'. This semantic merging reflects a cultural assumption that sexuality is reducible to sexual intercourse and

that it is a function of the relations between women and men. The cultural fusion of gender with sexuality has given rise to the idea that a theory of sexuality may be derived directly out of a theory of gender (Rubin 1999: 169).

The gaps pertaining to representation of sexuality in *Churails* need to be, thus, contextualised on the basis of the series' focus on issues of gendered inequality, and injustice, which may not always provide an appropriate climate for a nuanced representation of sexuality, even though the latter always exists in the margins. For instance, in the fourth episode, after Ehtisham is caught, and eventually murdered by his wife, his companion, Naeem, who is Baby Doll's friend, articulates the limitations of conventional perceptions with regards to queer individuals, who are often treated as baits for sexual exploitation and perverse desires, and barely find scope for companionship in a society governed by heterosexual, and/ or procreative norms of gendered and sexual relations. Moreover, there's greater criticism or demonization of "non-routine acts of love" (Rubin, 1999: 166) instead of "routine acts of oppression, exploitation, or violence" (166) against queer individuals. For Naisargi Dave, an integral component of queer politics pertaining to identity creation, and activism is the "problematization, invention, and creative relational practice" (Dave, 2012: 8) or the formulation of "alternative sociality as queer family, friends, lovers" (8). In *Churails*, this "space of invention ... for the creative practice of new forms of care and relationality" (8) exists in tentative moments such as Baby Doll's birthday celebration with her queer friends in episode four, late at night, near a street food stall. One sees a different side to Baby Doll in this scene because all their queer friends along with them get an opportunity to articulate their alternate affective interests, and sexual fluidity in a company that would comprehend such fluidity of erotic desire, and not judge them for it. Similarly, there are a few moments dedicated to the relationship of the lesbian couple, who are a part of the detective agency, and go through varied stages of conflict and reconciliation in their relationship. While the affective sociality of the adopted, invented family of the motley group at the detective agency in *Churails* does provide scope for the inventive space of alternate sociality as proposed by Dave, the specific engagement with issues pertaining to sexuality (expressions of alternate and fluid sexual desires, and the need to resist against exploitation on account of sexual orientation), and

how these might intervene into or complicate the feminist resistance of the collective, are concerns that, perhaps, the web-series wishes for the viewers to ponder over.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to explore the conflict of conceptualising and sustaining a collective feminist consciousness in the Third World context with the help of the primary text, Asim Abbasi's web series, *Churails*. The paper begins with an examination of the initial assumption of universal sisterhood of the four protagonists, and a motley group of women and a transgender who join hands to found a collective agential consciousness in the form of a feminist detective agency. The paper argues for the productive potential of this initial formulation of women despite its simplistic nature, and lack of sufficient insight into the category of difference. Raby's analysis on the modernist conception of resistance provides a framework of analysis for this section. The second section explores the complexities of difference emerging on the basis of the intersections between gender, class, geographical location, and sexuality, that become prominent towards the middle and end of the web-series. There is a gradual transition of the feminist resistance in the web-series from being unified, and monolithic, to facing the contradictions of differential frameworks of location of various members of the detective agency that render their collective consciousness threatened, and conflicted. Raby's analysis on the postmodernist conception of resistance as well as Reagon's concept of coalition have been utilised in this section. The section eventually locates possibilities in the web-series to sustain the collective resistant consciousness on the basis of the principle of coalition that may not work as a naturalised space of belonging, such as a home, but can nonetheless be a transformative space requiring a continued effort towards forging belonging and inclusion on the basis of the politics of engagement and alternate norms of sociality.

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