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Aurat Raj: Hacking Masculinity & Reimagining Gender in South Asian Cinema

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This article interprets the 1979 Pakistani film *Aurat Raj (Women's Rule)* as a work of feminist speculative fiction. The film presents a radically reimagined gendered world through its narrative of role reversal. Drawing on the concept of hacking as a practice of inspection and reconfiguration, I read women's characters in *Aurat Raj* as entering and dissecting the leaky system of gender to salvage and reconstitute masculinity. The film highlights systemic problems of gender in electoral politics, social relations, and media representations through the phantasm of song, dance, and comedy. I argue that the fantastical scenarios, musical flights, and comedic twists in the film function as interventionist tools and techniques that help complicate and refashion the present by envisioning radical futures.

Re/Imagining feminist futurity is presumed to be the realm of the West with the assumption that creative ideas for such imaginations emerge and cultivate in Western sites because of the way transnational circuits of in/visibilities and global hierarchies function.¹ The Muslim world in particular, imagined as a static and monolithic entity, is not presumed to be a site from which speculative futuristic narratives could emerge.² In reality, the tradition of speculative fiction in the Muslim literary traditions can be traced back to the *Thousand and One Nights*. The *Nights*, a collection of stories generally presented as fairytales or folktales,³ takes readers on fantastic voyages and introduces them to alternative utopian societies.⁴ Some of the tales within this collection include characters that subvert gender hierarchies indicative of feminist leanings within its speculative narratives.⁵ In South Asia, feminist speculative fiction can be linked to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali storywriter in colonial India.⁶ Hossain's 1905 novel *Sultana's Dream* transports readers to Ladyland, a feminist utopian world from which men are banished.⁷ Perhaps inspired by such traditions,⁸ Rangeela, a Pakistani writer, director, producer, and comedian, made an

Urdu language⁹ comedy film *Aurat Raj/Women's Rule*, which was released in 1979.¹⁰ However, *Aurat Raj* differs from *Sultana's Dream* in that its utopic futurity is not located in a secluded gendered space and time. Instead, it attempts to reconstruct masculinity and gender through its speculative narrative of role reversal.

Critics hail *Aurat Raj* as Pakistan's first feminist film due to its visual depiction of a radically re-imagined gendered world.¹¹ While critics have emphasized the role reversal aspect of the film, I offer a close reading of *Aurat Raj* to argue that the film primarily problematizes masculinity by hacking the binary gender system in which it resides.¹² Forlano and Jungnickel conceptualize hacking as "a way of gaining entry into the inner workings of a leaky artefact or system, to interrogate its sociocultural, gendered, historical, and material composition."¹³ I am employing their framework to argue that hacking is a series of tools and techniques in *Aurat Raj* with the help of which women's characters enter the leaky system of binary gender. They interrogate and examine the system's glitches and complications and re-imagine the political and social structures addressing issues of electoral politics, gender relations, and media representations. The conceptual tool of hacking is deployed "not simply to dewire but also to rewire our current hegemonic binaristic system into one of justice and transformative feminist possibility."¹⁴

Aurat Raj also demonstrates a juncture of reimagining the world through cultural productions from non-Western positions. In this sense, *Aurat Raj's* popular cinematic re/imagination of postcolonial masculinity and gender relations can be understood as a process that connects to and builds on Hossain's literary intervention in colonial South Asia and speculative tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*. Just as the tales in the *Thousand and One Nights* are often dismissed as "simple, badly told, or simply marginal" without recognizing "powerful devices of storytelling and the ingenious craft of storytellers," popular cinema in India and Pakistan is often discarded and degraded as trivial.¹⁵ Ashish Nandy defends popular cinema as "never trivial, not even when it is expressed in films that are trivial."¹⁶ Following Nandy, who argues that "the politics of popular cinema is the art of the possible,"¹⁷ I am presenting the case of *Aurat Raj*.¹⁸ The film departs from various standard narratives and gives us a utopian vision, which, in Jose Esteban Munoz's terms, helps us "surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness" and allows us "to see a different time and place."¹⁹ The film, like Hossain's novella, thus provides an impetus to continue the work of imagining radical futures from the margins. However, the purpose of this paper is not to argue for competing

narratives within East and West or center and margin binaries. The aim is, as Sara Ahmed says, “to tell other feminist stories.”²⁰

Women’s Rule

In the opening dream sequence of *Aurat Raj*, Soofia, a traditional subjugated housewife, struggles to rescue her alcoholic philandering husband from an advancing army of armed modern women riding on beautiful horses. While her frustration is evident by her incapacity to control the situation, the phantasmagoric world offers glimpses of the times to come. Peculiar visuals in which horses have men’s facial features (see Figure 1) intercut with title cards. Soofia dressed like a warrior empress envisions herself holding the reigns of those horses perhaps as a metaphor to take on the world. While Soofia returns to the gritty realities of constant humiliation and abuse, the film’s speculative narrative builds and eggs her on to transform the personal into political. After getting divorced from her abusive husband, Soofia seeks to alter the prevailing tyrannical gender system. Her first step in executing her future vision of gaining control and power is hacking the androcentric electoral and political system.²¹ In the fantastical world of the film, we thus encounter the formation of political parties along gender lines: Women’s Party, Men’s Party, and Independents comprising gender ambiguous, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary people known as *hijras* or *khwaja siras*.²²



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Image1-1.png>)

Figure 1 – Title visuals from *Aurat Raj* (Screenshot from YouTube)

The Women’s Party led by Soofia faces stiff opposition from men leading to an all-out civil war between them. Women, who are typically shown in Pakistani films as embodiments of virtue and in need of protection, take up arms to fight the menace of toxic masculinity. To restore order to the prevailing gender anarchy, arbitration comes, ironically, from *goras* (white men played by brown actors²³ speaking Urdu with English accents) who form a peace committee to supervise free and fair elections. The film references the recurrent trope of world politics in which people from the Global North, as bearers of democratic values, operate as election monitors or arbiters of peace in the Global South. The film also makes a mockery of the colonial title, *The British Raj*, displacing its first part with *Aurat*, symbolically replacing colonial power with women’s rule. While the film primarily seeks to hack local systems, it also attempts to reference and subvert the global political order through these interventions.

With the electoral process underway, women struggle to seek votes through customary electioneering tools such as speeches, campaigning, and convincing, but to no avail. Desperate to win, women decide to enter the speculative world of song and dance in South Asian cinema using its “affective power.”²⁴ Song and dance sequences in commercial films in South Asia provide space for filmmakers to perform feats that are

impossible within the confines of the narrative either due to the restrictions of the state through its censor policies or perceived conservatism of general audiences.²⁵ This is one of the reasons why songs replace scenes that require depicting sexuality, physical intimacy, and desire.²⁶ However, songs do not only function to depict passion and romance but they also “facilitate the passage of time, evoke memories, aid in characterization, and operate as a mode of indirect address.”²⁷ Hence, they perform like speculative fiction transporting viewers to the worlds of “fantasy and excess.”²⁸ Song and dance sequences can thus be seen as playing a complementary role in *Aurat Raj*'s speculative narrative. In the following sections, I will show how this world of excess is enacted in the film, first to hack the elections and subsequently throughout the film to hack the binary gender system for the purpose of rewiring, reassembling, and reimagining it.

Commercial films in South Asia typically include five to six songs. *Aurat Raj* exceeds the average number of principal songs along with numerous other musical interludes. The very first instance of music's fantastical intervention happens in the election contest.²⁹ However, instead of resorting to the standard romantic song and dance routine, the representatives of gender-based parties perform a dialogic musical presentation using the Sufi Muslim genre of devotional music called *qawwali*. *Qawwali* is “essentially a male genre” and is associated with live performance in a spiritual setting.³⁰ However, this spiritual devotional music has undergone many changes over the years in its encounters with popular culture in India and Pakistan. Qureshi traces the development of a genre of *qawwali*, which she calls narrative *qawwali*, to the 1950s.³¹ The narrative *qawwali* involved contests between two groups of male performers, which were recorded and sold.³² The film industry in India was quick to adapt and secularize this style where both men and women sang and performed mostly to invoke a typical Muslim atmosphere.³³ This form of cinematic adaptation happens in the lyrics and visual performance while retaining the original sound character of *qawwali*: “group song, hand clapping, rhythmic accentuation, and crisp articulation.”³⁴ *Aurat Raj* adapts the same style of *qawwali* in which each party argues for its election agenda. Women start clapping and singing, repeating the following punch lines:

Aapkay vote ki haqdar hai aurat logo
Ab hakoomat ki talabgar hai aurat logo
 Women deserve your vote, O people
 Women now desire to rule, O people

Men retort with their arguments outlining why women's rule will not be beneficial for them and that they will lose their supremacy and privileges. Women try to convince men that their interests will be safeguarded under their rule. Marginalized in society, *hijras* also make their case evoking nostalgia about how they played important historical role in the courts of the Mughals and other Muslim rulers in South Asia and hence deserve to rule. *Hijras* being the minority group remains on the sidelines of the lyrical contest of the two genders though.³⁵ They are deployed for their entertainment value in the backdrop of the binary gender system.³⁶ Rhythm and claps of women outperform men's convincing the populace that women's rule is in everyone's interest. Women turn the chapter of history within the duration of this *qawwali* performance winning over all the voters. As a result of this fantastical musical intervention, women gain power and become rulers.³⁷

Women come to power but they want more to revenge years of subjugation and oppression. In desperation they seek help from white men, indicating postcolonial dependence on neocolonial powers. Soofia brings them to the negotiating table asking if it's possible to transform men and women's gendered realities. White men, who maintain their superiority on the grounds of advancements in science and technology, offer the new government a bomb with the capabilities of transforming men into women and vice versa with its smoke. Realizing that the coffers of the postcolonial state are empty, women have to take loans from the makers and marketers of biopolitical technologies continuing their dependency on white masculinity. The smoke causes physical and functional changes in men and women altering their physical appearance, dressing, mannerism, and voice. White men remain unaffected by this bomb perhaps because they reside on the top of the ecological chain of the gendered world. Visible changes in gendered presentations and performances of men and women (see Figures 2 & 3) lead to the dewiring of the whole binary system.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Image2-2.png>)

Figure 2: Actor Waheed Murad mistreating Soofia played by actress Rani in Aurat Raj (Screenshot from YouTube)



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Image3-2.png>)

Figure 3: Role reversal – Masculinized Soofia mistreating feminized Waheed Murad in *Aurat Raj* (Screenshot from YouTube)

Hacking Masculinity & Dewiring the Binary System

Under women's rule male and female gender performances and their social relations alter (see Figures 2 & 3) but it is the transformation of men in particular that opens up avenues to confront past injustices. The feminine iteration of the male body becomes an archive for excavating histories.³⁸ These are the histories that are not only embedded in social realities but have also been produced through cinematic fictions and popular culture. The stories of battered women who are always looking up to men for protection have been told and retold in cinema and other media in South Asia and beyond.³⁹ To demonstrate the systemic flaws, *Aurat Raj* draws intertextually from popular culture and cites from earlier cinematic representations of women indicating "a metonymic association between cinema and society."⁴⁰ The cinematic tropes function metonymically not simply by the citation of gender hierarchies but by their reiterations. The texts become performative as they reiterate "a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that performativity acquires an act like status in the present."⁴¹ In South Asian films, melodrama and song and dance sequences have helped reify and in some cases enact gender norms. However, *Aurat Raj's* citation of such tropes in role reversal is not an attempt at resignification; rather the film highlights flaws of earlier significations. Hence, the film's approach is not prescriptive in that it only brings to the fore absurdities inherent within such tropes.

Numerous films and television shows produced in various parts of the world, including India and Pakistan, center around characters that disguise as the opposite gender to achieve various narrative goals. For instance, in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993) and its adaptation in India *Chachi 420* (Kamal Haasan, 1997), men disguise as female nannies to foster a nurturing relationship with their children. These characters defy the myth of muscular, phallogentric masculinity but do not challenge the oppressive dynamics of the existing gender system in the society.⁴² Characters in these two films in particular are subversive but still function within the dominant reproductive ideology. *Aurat Raj's* intervention does not lie in redressing the situation represented by one or a few characters. Instead, it sets out to underscore systemic issues by subverting the entire gender system and that too with little or no regard to the reproductive function. Soofia's only son, whose gender also transforms and whose presence in her previous

avatar did not make any difference in her respectability and status as a woman, becomes secondary in the narrative compared to other concerns such as sexual assault, rape, torture, abuse, eve teasing, harassment, infidelity, marriage rituals and traditions, and numerous other issues that plague the society in the binary gender system.

Aurat Raj addresses women's issues in its mockingly comedic intertextual references in the new world where roles have been reversed. Since many societal values and morals are embodied in women, their disembodiment from women and re-embodiment onto men is a situation for comedy on one level but it reveals their incongruities and inconsistencies on another. Such hypocrisies are laid bare in the figure of the dancing girl who performs *mujra* (dance show for men). Women's dances in films in South Asia are desired for the visual pleasures of audiences but at the same time their act of performing in front of men is disavowed. So the first thing all-dressed-to-the-nines male actors do in *Aurat Raj* is perform *mujra* in the court of the newly appointed women rulers who take pleasures in men's newly embodied femininity. The trope of making women dance in public or in front of men is regarded as an insult and a cause for disgrace for women's families or their male lovers. In the classic Indian film *Sholay/Flames* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975), heroine's dance in front of the villain and his coterie of goons while her male lover stands chained is legendary in South Asian popular culture on both sides of the border (see Figure 4). *Aurat Raj* cites this trope showing a male actor performing for women hoodlums.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Image4-2.png>)

Figure 4: Heroine's dance in *Sholay* (Screenshot from YouTube)

Song and dance in films is also an anchor to illustrate various stages of a romantic relationship between a man and woman. When women fall in love they dance in ecstasy and joy and when their lovers become angry they dance to win them back and sing songs pining for their love. We see similar parodies in *Aurat Raj* as male actors dressed up as women roll on the ground, or run in the park waving their long colorful *dupattas* in the air, or sway their hips to appease their lovers. In love triangles, men become the center of attention for women who long for his love. In *Aurat Raj* on the other hand, men have to go through the pains of unrequited love. Soofia romances with another actor Sultan Rahi (see Figure 5), who has played roles of hypermasculine rural hero in numerous vernacular Punjabi language films (see Figure 6), while her husband plucks grass in desperation. The hacking of hypermasculine Sultan Rahi in *Aurat Raj* is a reflection on the leaky system of gender representation in scores of local films.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Image5-1.png>)

Figure 5: Role Reversal – Soofia flirting with actor Sultan Rahi (Screenshot from YouTube)



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Image6-2.png>)

Figure 6: Actress Anjuman performing with actor Sultan Rahi in a Punjabi language film (Screenshot from YouTube)

In Pakistan's national language films for a long time and its vernacular films in Punjabi and Pashto languages to date, women dance their hearts out running around in expansive landscapes for men who stand stiff and stoic while their gaze is not in their direction for most of the song with occasional direct looks (see Figure 6). The trope of off-center male gaze, deployed to obliquely witness women's dance performances in public spaces and landscapes, differs from the direct voyeuristic gaze in Hollywood films "looking in on a private world."⁴³ To present the conundrum of dancing and male gaze, a Pakistani visual artist Rabia Hassan, hacks into various films and extracts scenes of dancing men to compile a video installation piece called *Naach (Dance)* to demonstrate her own interpretation of the role reversal scenario (**see video** (<https://vimeo.com/87553220>)).⁴⁴ In the video, Hassan, juxtaposes men's performances with women's gaze to re-imagine cinematic presentation of masculinity in films. However, women's gaze in her interpretations is more direct than is generally the case with male gaze in numerous Pakistani films. Most of the Pakistani films depict women in various tropes from coquettish shyness and flirtatious feminine charm to seductive poses and bold postures while men exhibit chauvinism, chivalry, and distant admiration. Over the years the demeanor of women performers in Pakistani films has shifted from coy to

bold,⁴⁵ but they remain the object of men's, mostly "oblique,"⁴⁶ gaze. Women perform and yearn for not only the gaze of the male actors but also, by proxy, the gaze of the spectators.⁴⁷ However, in the case of Pakistani films, the male gaze – of actors as well as spectators – can be considered oblique, caught between avowal and disavowal due to the ambivalent status of women's public dance performances.

While making a respectable middle or lower class woman dance is deemed disgraceful, a woman who performs *mujra* in brothels, also called *bazaar* or *heera mandi* (diamond market) or *kotha* (urban salon), is condemned to the lowest status in society. However, in South Asian cinema, the figure of the courtesan has a liminal status because she is the embodiment of nostalgic high Muslim culture in pre/colonial India but at the same time "rendered abject by normative moral codes" in postcolonial South Asia.⁴⁸ Various films like *Pakeezah* (Kamal Amrohi, 1972) and *Umrao Jaan Ada/Umrao Jaan* (Hasan Tariq, 1972; Muzaffar Ali, 1981; Rana Sheikh, 2003; J.P. Dutta, 2006) in both India and Pakistan have particularly focused on this figure to demonstrate the conundrum of dancing and its conflict with familial and middle-class respectability.⁴⁹ The characters of women performers remain overwhelmed by shame and self-loathing for dancing for men's pleasures.⁵⁰ While they perform in the red light areas, they miraculously continue to escape sexual contact.⁵¹ The trope of virginity has been deployed in many films placing it on the highest pedestal among all values desirable in women. From outcast sex workers to brides belonging to middle/lower-class families, many women characters aspire to achieve this ultimate goal of keeping their virginity intact in films. A blockbuster Pakistani film *Dulhan Ek Raat Ki/Bride for a Night* (Mumtaz Ali Khan, 1975) is based on the same premise in which the bride continues to escape multiple goons throughout the duration of the film until saved and protected by the male protagonist in the end.

Making intertextual references to all such cinematic tropes, *Aurat Raj* makes a mockery of notions of purity and morality required in women. Like *Bride for a Night*, a man is kidnapped on his wedding night in *Aurat Raj* and women seek to rescue and protect him. Later in the film, the actor Waheed Murad is sold in the bazaar where he attempts to escape sexual contact with women clients. It is at this moment, Soofia reminds him of his blighted past and numerous sexual relations with other females before women's rule started. Murad continues to invoke notions of *ghairat*, "honor"⁵² to shake the conscience of Soofia by proclaiming, "*Yeh daman abhi daghdar nahin hua*," implying that he has not had penetrative sex yet, but to no avail. One does not help but read homoerotic implications here. In another scene, some middle class men are abducted

who yell and scream “*mardon ki izzat loti ja rahi hai*” (Men are being sexually assaulted and disgraced). In various scenes, helpless and miserable men are shown crying, yelling, and screaming as they are flirted with, harassed, kidnapped, and assaulted, mocking the conventional role of men as protectors. On various occasions Soofia is shown mercilessly slapping and kicking Murad to replay scenes of violence on women in films. However, Soofia’s revenge for violence is not limited to local men. Later in the film, when one of the white men flirts with Soofia, as gender roles for white men remain unreversed, Soofia slaps him, challenging the top contenders on the hierarchy of masculinity. Unable to handle the insult at the hands of a third world woman, white men seek revenge. They take counter measures to amend the hacked gender system. They decide to use an antidote to the smoke bomb to transition men and women back to their normative gender embodiments. However, to undo the impacts of hacking and rewire the dewired system to its original form they face stiff resistance from women who now look for restorative justice and the recognition of their rightful position in society. Until the objective of equilibrium is achieved, the system remains in flux till the end of the film.

Beyond Role Reversal

Two types of masculine characters have emerged in Pakistani films: a morally upright, well-groomed, soft-spoken, urban hero (see Figure 3) and a violence-prone, loud, rural protagonist (see Figure 6),⁵³ enacting codes of masculinity along urban/rural, national/vernacular, and modern/traditional divides. These “male cultural types” in films present to us a way of understanding discourses of hegemonic masculinity.⁵⁴ Similarly, leading women’s characters usually oscillate between shy, demure, obedient, homemaking heroines and bold, bad, modern vixens.⁵⁵ Like “male cultural types,” women’s characters also typically fit into certain molds showing limited representations of a range of masculine and feminine embodiments and performances. *Aurat Raj* not only breaks those molds in its role reversal but it also offers us an opportunity to read beyond the reversal narrative in the masculine and feminine embodiments of the female and male characters respectively. The film challenges what it means to be a man and woman physically, and speculatively presents to us a world with radically different bodily orientations.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Image7.png>)

Figure 7: A scene from Aurat Raj (Screenshot from YouTube)

In the reversed gendered scenario of *Aurat Raj*, men wear traditional clothes, jewelry, and make-up adopting feminine mannerisms while using male gender pronouns. Some of them also retain masculine features such as facial hair (see Figure 7). Women on the other hand wear mostly Western clothes and adopt masculine performance while keeping their feminine physical features. Within the arbitrary exchange of sartorial, linguistic, and other features, the film playfully exposes the tyranny of existing hierarchical gender relations that privilege masculinity over femininity in a binary relationship. However, in its playfulness the film offers a possibility of reading complex gendered presentations beyond the binary system. In the film's role reversal schema, masculinity is not reduced to male bodies,⁵⁶ and similarly, femininity is not restricted to female bodies. Variable gendered presentations emerge during the course of the film's shifting comedic narrative, perhaps, as an impetus for us to recognize people who fall in a range of gender performances beyond certain male or female types. *Aurat Raj* challenges stereotypical gender performances by presenting "different inscriptions of the sexed body."⁵⁷

Gender role transgressions and gender non-conforming presentations have existed and thrived in South Asian culture in various ways. Razia Sultan, the first Muslim woman

ruler of the thirteenth century Delhi Sultanate in India, presided over all affairs of the state like men did.⁵⁸ The pre-colonial history of India indicates acceptance of effeminate men and *hijras*.⁵⁹ However, those ways of being were marginalized by the colonial rule that fashioned South Asian gender and sexuality in its racialized and puritanical politics. This politics continued in postcolonial South Asia delegating non-normative gender abject status. While they function within and negotiate their social location in contemporary South Asian society, effeminate men face effeminophobia and *hijras* face social stigma because they present gender ambiguity, which is understood as the failure of the phallus and hence incapacity to fit into the heteronormative binary gender system. Female masculinity on the other hand is seldom discussed or represented.⁶⁰ Women's work whether at home or in typically labor-intensive fields such as agriculture, construction, and industry is devalued.⁶¹ *Aurat Raj* focuses on women's exploitation by men, but one can also read presentation and appreciation of female masculinity and male femininity.

While *hijras* disappear from the narrative, male actors' feminine performance is a close parody of how they enact, stylize, and perform their gendered selves in South Asia. Male actors' feminine performance thus becomes an alibi for *hijras'* absence in the latter part of the film. While the film effaces *hijras*, it presents gender ambiguity through female masculinity and male effeminacy. However, these presentations of masculinity and femininity are enacted within the heterosexual schema. While crossing the lines of normative gender performance, there is a lurking fear of crossing the line of normative sexuality. The role reversal doesn't alter the sexual object choice in the film, which remains the opposite sex. Considering a South Asian context, one doesn't expect the same logic of visibility as seen in Euro-American constructions of alternative sexual identities.⁶² However, the film in its presentation of gendered and sexed bodies implicitly showcases an "anticipation and promise directing us to a future that is not yet here."⁶³ The film does not make explicit the premise of non-normative sexuality; however, in its playful gender presentations it does call for a tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity.⁶⁴

Conclusions

In this article I have argued that the film *Aurat Raj* is an assault on masculinity as a way to reconstruct it. The film is not an aspiration for women to be and act like men. On the contrary, it aligns with the argument that the "new conceptions of masculinity can and indeed must be routed through feminism and the female body." In the role reversal

scenario of the film, women appear to revel in and make use of mobilities, freedoms, and affordances associated with their masculine embodiments. Men, on the other hand, overwhelmed by women's power, experience gender dysphoria and feel emasculated, degraded, disempowered, and impotent waiting to break free from the feminine spell. Masculinity recuperates and gender order restores in the end of the film only when men repudiate misogyny. *Aurat Raj's* feminist triumph lies in the reconstruction and re-imagination of the masculine and this reconstruction wasn't possible without staging its failures. By encountering its failure through the phantasm of song, dance, melodrama, and comedy, masculinity and resultantly gender relations are reimagined. *Aurat Raj* is thus an example of reconfiguring masculinity and gender through cultural work and creative imagination, which indicates that cinema, art, and literature could be tools and sites of possibilities to complicate the present and re-imagine the future.

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Notes:

1. The idea of feminism itself is often attributed to the West. Sara Ahmed challenges the common assumption that feminism travels from West to East. She calls it a traveling assumption; “one that tells a feminist story in a certain way, a story that is much repeated; a history of how feminism acquired utility as an imperial gift.” Citing her own personal life and roots in South Asia, she counters such an assumption. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 4. ↩
2. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). ↩
3. Marzolph contests the perception that the *Thousand and One Nights* is a collection of folkloric tales and argues that it is “a literature in between elite and popular literatures whose authors were educated and versatile in using folkloric motifs to compile highly complex stories.” See Ulrich Marzolph, “Making Sense of the *Nights*: Intertextual Connections and Narrative Techniques in the *Thousand and One Nights*,” *Narrative Culture* 1, no. 2 (2014): 244. ↩
4. Irwin mentions stories like that of the bird carrying Sinbad, flying carpets, and ebony horses as fantasies about the possibility of human flight. Another tale titled ‘Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman’ takes readers to the imaginary alternative society underwater as an inversion of the one on land. See Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*, (London: Allen Lane, 1994), 207-212. ↩
5. In the story on the hundred and eighth night, the characters of Maimunah and Dahnash appear as female and male supernatural jinns respectively. The tale presents female Maimunah as physically more powerful than male Dahnash. See Brad Epps, “Comparison, Competition, and Cross-Dressing: Cross-Cultural Analysis in a Contested World,” in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, eds. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2008), 114-124. ↩
6. See Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad, “Sci-Fi and Speculative Fiction in the Muslim Tradition,” *The Wire*, June 30, 2017, <https://thewire.in/151990/sci-fi-speculative-fiction-muslim-tradition/> (<https://thewire.in/151990/sci-fi-speculative-fiction-muslim-tradition/>). ↩

7. See Rafia Zakaria, "The Manless World of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain," *Dawn.com*, December 13, 2013, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1072250> (<http://www.dawn.com/news/1072250>) . ↵
8. The film also has literary links as it credits the idea of the story to a well-known Pakistani short story and humor writer Shaukat Thanvi. ↵
9. Pakistani cinema is produced in its national language Urdu as well as its regional languages such as Punjabi and Pashto. ↵
10. There are conflicting reports about the film's box office success. Referring to its business Gazdar calls it "a moment of triumph for the comedian-cum-filmmaker" and *Scroll* reports that the film was a "box office dud." See Mushtaq Gazdar, *Pakistan Cinema, 1947-1997* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 204; Nate Rabe, "Sound of Lollywood," *Scroll.in*, April 15, 2017, para 2, <https://thereel.scroll.in/834575/sound-of-lollywood-when-men-turned-into-dupatta-covered-minions-in-aurat-raj> (<https://thereel.scroll.in/834575/sound-of-lollywood-when-men-turned-into-dupatta-covered-minions-in-aurat-raj>) ↵
11. Feminists in Pakistan have even taken up the film's title and theme to start an online forum centering on women's rights and empowerment. See "A Girl Squad Working to Educate, Entertain and Empower Pakistani Women," *Aurat Raaj*, <https://www.auratraaj.com/> (<https://www.auratraaj.com/>) . ↵
12. See Gazdar, *Pakistan Cinema, 1947-1997*, 204; Nate Rabe, "Sound of Lollywood." ↵
13. Laura Forlano and Kat Jungnickel, "**Hacking Binaries/Hacking Hybrids: Understanding the Black/White Binary as a Socio-technical Practice**," (<https://adanewmedia.org/2015/01/issue6-forlano-jungnickel/>) *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no.6 (2015): para 3. ↵
14. Brittney Cooper and Maragaret Rhee, "**Introduction: Hacking the Black/White Binary**," (<https://adanewmedia.org/2015/01/issue6-cooper/rhee/>) *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no.6 (2015), para 5. ↵
15. Marzolph, "Making Sense of the *Nights*," 253. ↵
16. Ashish Nandy, *The Secret Politics of Our Desire: Innocence, Culpability, and Indian Popular Cinema*. (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998), 8. ↵
17. Ibid., 9. ↵
18. I am focusing on the film's speculative narrative rather than the quality of its production. ↵

19. Jose Esteban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 5. ↵
20. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 4. ↵
21. This is perhaps a reflection of women's past struggles in Pakistani politics. Marred by military coups and dictatorships, prominent women in Pakistani politics such as Begum Shaista Ikramullah and Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan were assigned ambassadorial positions as a way of keeping them away from mainstream politics during the 1950s and 1960s. Fatima Jinnah, the sister of the founding father of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah, faced stiff opposition from military men in charge of the Pakistani state when she ran for elections in 1965. See M. Reza Pirbhai, *Fatima Jinnah: Mother of the Nation*, (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017). ↵
22. *Khwaja sira* and *hijra* are umbrella terms commonly used for gender ambiguous, gender non-binary, gender non-conforming, and trans identifying people in South Asia. Other local terms include *khusra*, *moorat*, *zenana*, and *kothi*. For more, see Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Faris A. Khan, **"Khwaja Sira Activism: The Politics of Gender Ambiguity in Pakistan,"** (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/302987224_Khwaja_Sira_Activism_The_Politics_of_Gender_Identity_in_Pakistan) *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1-2 (2016), 159. ↵
23. Brown actors often play roles of white men in Pakistani films like white actors are cast to play non-white characters in Hollywood. ↵
24. Ann Morcom, *Illicit worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11. ↵
25. Tejaswini Ganti, "And Yet My Heart is Still Indian: The Bombay Film Industry and (H)Indianization of Hollywood," in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, eds. Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 294. ↵
26. Ibid. ↵
27. Ibid, 295. ↵
28. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 101. ↵
29. This is not the first song of the film. I am proposing this as the first fantastical intervention in a musical form. ↵

30. Shemeem Burney Abbas, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 58. ↩
31. Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, "Recorded Sound & Religious Music: The Case of *Qawwali*," in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, eds. Lawrence A. Babb and Susan Snow Wadley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 147, 150. ↩
32. Ibid. ↩
33. Ibid, 151. ↩
34. Ibid. ↩
35. The film sidelines *hijras* but they have been attempting to claim their place in electoral politics in South Asia. In 1990, Muhammad Aslam, a *zenana*, ran as an independent candidate in the national elections in Pakistan after whom other *hijras* also pursued electoral politics. In India, they have won city council and legislative assembly seats and mayoral positions despite all odds against them. Shabnam Mausi became one of the first *hijra* members of the state legislative assembly in India between 1998 and 2003. See, Claire Pamment, "Hijraism: Jostling for a Third Space in Pakistani Politics." *TDR: The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies* 54, no. 2 (2010): 35-36, doi: **10.1162/dram.2010.54.2.29** (<https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/dram.2010.54.2.29>) . ↩
36. *Hijras* in Indian and Pakistani cinema are either completely ignored or represented in reductive ways as side characters. There are very few films that revolve around *hijras* as central characters. The Channel 4 film *Immaculate Conception* (Jamil Dehlavi, 1992), shot on location in Pakistan, has *hijras* as central exotic characters in the fictional world of a shrine in Karachi. Films such as *Darmiyaan: In Between* (Kalpana Lajmi, 1997) and *Shabnam Mausi* (Yogesh Bharadwaj, 2005), on the life of the first *hijra* member of the state legislative assembly in India, are the few examples of films on *hijras* based in Bollywood. For more on *hijras* in Bollywood see: Gurvinder Kalra and Dinesh Bhugra, "Hijras in Bollywood Cinema," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 16, no. 3 (2015), 160-68, doi: **10.1080/15532739.2015.1080646** (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15532739.2015.1080646?journalCode=wijt20>) . ↩

37. This moment in the film is a reflection of changing role of women in South Asian politics. In India, Indira Gandhi became the first female prime minister in 1966 leading Indian National Congress Party. Benazir Bhutto lead Pakistan People's Party in general elections in 1988 and was elected as the first woman prime minister of a Muslim majority country. ↵
38. Here I draw from Gopinath's analytical work in *Impossible Desires*. ↵
39. The protection narrative is common in many recent American productions as well including super hero films and TV shows. For more see Carol A. Stabile, "Sweetheart, This Ain't Gender Studies': Sexism and Superheroes," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2009), 86-92, doi: [10.1080/14791420802663686](https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420802663686) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14791420802663686>). ↵
40. Ganti, "And Yet My Heart is Still Indian," 289. ↵
41. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), xxi. ↵
42. Radhika Chopra, "Retrieving the Father: Gender Studies, "Father Love" and the Discourse of Mothering," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24, no. 3-4 (2001), 452, doi: [10.1016/S0277-5395\(01\)00168-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(01)00168-6) (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248330335_Retrieving_the_father). ↵
43. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 345. ↵
44. **This video** (<https://vimeo.com/87553220>) was a part of Rabia Hassan's visual art project called *Scene Unseen* curated by Sanat gallery in Karachi, Pakistan. Rabia Hassan is the daughter of the actress Rani who played the lead role of Soofia in *Aurat Raj*. ↵
45. See Wajiha Raza Rizvi, "Visual Pleasure in Pakistani Cinema (1947-2014)," *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 10, no. 2 (2014), http://ijaps.usm.my/?page_id=2414 (http://ijaps.usm.my/?page_id=2414). ↵
46. Other concepts of oblique gaze include Hamid Naficy's explanation of "averted look" in Iranian post-revolution cinema. See Hamid Naficy, "Women and the Semiotics of Veiling and Vision in Cinema," *The American Journal of Semiotics* 8, no. 1/2 (1991), 57-59. doi: [10.5840/ajs199181/225](https://doi.org/10.5840/ajs199181/225) (https://www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/purchase?openform&fp=ajs&id=ajs_1991_0008_0001_0047_0064). ↵
47. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 347. ↵

48. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 87. ↵
49. Both *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jan Ada* romanticize the figure of the courtesan. *Pakeezah* is considered a cult classic of Bollywood. For more on *Pakeezah* see Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*; Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance*. *Umrao Jan Ada*'s character of a courtesan, based on a novel, has been successfully adapted for cinema in both India and Pakistan. In Pakistan, the novel was adapted into a television drama as well. ↵
50. Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance*, 3. ↵
51. *Ibid.*, 3. ↵
52. The word *ghairat* has often been translated as "honor" in various academic, media, and human rights discourses. Epps talks about fetishized notions of honor running through Islamic as well as Christian societies, especially in the Middle Ages. See Epps, "Comparison, Competition, and Cross-Dressing," 121. The term "honor killing" in particular has been used in media to frame murders of women by their relatives in South Asian countries and its diasporas separating these crimes from the continuum of gendered violence that prevails in all countries. See Yasmin Jiwani, "Violating In/Visibilities: Honor Killings and Interlocking Surveillance," in *Feminist Surveillance Studies*, eds. Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Shoshana Magnet (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 79. Some other scholars have used alternative terms. For instance, Gayatri Reddy has translated a similar word *izzat* as "respect" for her work on *hijras* in South India. See Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 17-18. ↵
53. Iqbal Sevea, "Kharaak Kita Oi!: Masculinity, Caste, and Gender in Punjabi Films." *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014), 131-132, doi: **10.1177/0974927614548645**
(<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0974927614548645>) . ↵
54. *Ibid.*, 130. ↵
55. See Rizvi, "Visual Pleasure in Pakistani Cinema." ↵
56. See Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). ↵
57. *Ibid.*, 40. ↵
58. Razia Sultan was the only female sultan who ruled over Delhi between 1236 and 1240 AD. Her life has also been depicted in a biopic titled

Razia Sultan (Kamal Amrohi, 1983). For more see Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*. ↩

59. See Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance*. ↩

60. Here I draw from Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*. ↩

61. Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, *Women of Pakistan Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* (London and Atlantic Highlands: Zed Books, 1987), 23-29. ↩

62. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 103. ↩

63. Munoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 26. ↩

64. Here I draw from Anzaldúa's call for tolerance of ambiguity and contradictions in *la mestiza*. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 101. ↩

◀ CINEMA ◀ GENDER ◀ MASCULINITY ◀ PAKISTAN ◀ PEER REVIEWED ◀ SONG AND DANCE

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