

## PAKISTAN'S ELITE ENGLISH PRESS DEBATES PIONEER WOMEN: HINA RABBANI KHAR AND SHARMEEN OBAID CHINOY

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### **Abstract**

*This study analyses the portrayal of Pakistan's first female Foreign Minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, and Pakistan's only female Oscar-winning filmmaker, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, in the newspaper coverage of four Pakistan's four leading English newspapers, The News, Dawn, The Express Tribune and the Nation. It is also investigated if the debate on women has changed in Pakistan's patriarchal social system and they are encouraged for their achievements. The study is theoretically linked with framing theory and conducts a discourse analysis of 94 news articles. The findings depict a different image of these women as media appreciated the achievements of SOC while discouraged a debate on HRK due to the profession of both the women.*

**Keywords:** Hina Rabbani Khar, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, Newspaper, Women, Pakistan.

### **Introduction**

**N**oted filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy (SOC) is Pakistan's leading female to have two Oscars to her name, for the best short documentaries in 2012 and 2016, while Hina Rabbani Khar (HRK) was Pakistan's youngest and first female Foreign Minister in 2011. Both the women represented Pakistan on a global setting and came under public scrutiny for their respective roles in the patriarchal Pakistani society. HRK repeatedly faced sexist remarks and was targeted for the inability for the office she held. On the other hand, SOC faced slurs of being a "western agent" or the "mouthpiece of the west" after her success at the Oscars, for her documentary on honor killing. In general masses, the Oscar failed to qualify as a proud moment for Pakistan and was sadly contoured with hesitations and displeasure since it followed a bitter criticism of SOC. SOC was called a pawn in the hands of the West for projecting a rather ugly and traumatic image of Pakistan<sup>1</sup>.

This research aims to reveal the opposing discourses of femininities offered by the elite print media in Pakistan by concentrating on changing narratives about women's empowerment and, their social and political positioning. This research project studies how major English-language newspapers in Pakistan have mediated public

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debates about influential women in Pakistan. The research is based on The News, Dawn, The Nation, and The Express Tribune since these four national dailies have the largest circulation, have different news audiences geographically and represent distinctive business interests, and different editorial positions on the political spectrum. It explores how these newspapers have reported these issues and events around these women and the extent to which these media have provided a space for a range of voices, argument, and diversity of opinion<sup>2</sup>.

Since gender is one of the establishing principles of Pakistani society and male-dominated beliefs have placed women in reproductive roles as mothers and wives in the private arena of home; therefore, it is utmost to contemplate the ways news media opens up spaces for opinions and arguments on significant gender issues and generates public debate<sup>3</sup>.

### **Pakistan's News Media and English Language Press**

Pakistan has a vibrant news media in over ten languages. Paradoxically, the diversification of news has not necessarily led to greater debate and plurality of perspectives in the press. Pakistan's English-language press, which is believed to be "echoing the modern western news leads", enjoys a special status<sup>4</sup>.

English became the de facto official language of Pakistan at the time of partition of British India. All domains of power - government, bureaucracy, military, judiciary, commerce, media and education - use English at the highest level. Since it is empowering to learn English, Pakistanis are ready to invest in it for the future of their children. English and Urdu languages have strengthened the process of nation-building, and both have invested in the national project more than any other vernacular language. However, English enjoys a special status since the lack of materials (corpus planning) has handicapped Urdu as the only official language. Thus, to run the government smoothly, English is maintained as the official language, Urdu is recognized as the national language<sup>5</sup>.

The governments of General Musharraf (1999-2008) and Asif Ali Zardari (2008-2013) greatly valued English and implemented policies to teach English as a result of the country's tilt towards English-medium schools, students learn from textbooks containing discourses originating from Western countries. This student body tends to be more tolerant of the 'Other' (women). They are generally believers in liberal-humanist and democratic values. Thus they are less susceptible to sectarian prejudices or the persecution of minorities in Pakistan<sup>6</sup>.

Consequently, Pakistan's English newspapers are more liberal and open-minded than the Urdu-language and vernacular press and cater to the products of English educational institutions, who are likely to challenge the existing state of affairs<sup>7</sup>. This research will outline the gender debate by the English-language press and its attitude towards Pakistani women and argue: how has the print media dealt with gender issues and overcome gender stereotypes?

Four major Pakistani media groups have thrived in the last decade. The research is based on four popular English newspapers, one from each group: *The News*, *The Nation*, *Dawn*, and *Express Tribune*. These four national newspapers have the largest circulation, have different news audiences geographically, and represent distinctive business interests, and different editorial positions on the political spectrum<sup>8</sup>.

The Independent Media Corporation (IMC) is the oldest and biggest media giant in Pakistan and dates back to 1940. The group enjoys a shared monopoly, both in print and broadcast media, and its profits are higher than the cumulative incomes of all other media groups in Pakistan. IMC's English-language newspaper *The News* often becomes entangled in bitter debates with the Islamist groups. *The News* criticised the murder of Pakistan's social media celebrity, Qandeel Baloch, who was asphyxiated during sleep and referred to her as "a symbol of defiance"<sup>9</sup> for challenging patriarchy<sup>10</sup>.

The Waqt Media Group is the second largest media group. Hameed Nizami launched the group in 1942. The group has regularly attracted criticism from the liberal society due to its sympathies for extremism in Pakistan. Khan and Safder argue that the group intentionally engages itself in religious controversies to gain publicity due to its sensitivity to conservative causes. Kheeshadeh accuses Waqt group of a "remorseless campaign against all liberal trends and progressive forces in national life". Waqt group's editorial policies have promoted the idea of Pakistan as an Islamic state, and repeatedly it has condemned the controversial debates that break stereotypes. It has referred to the rise of internet sensation Qandeel Baloch as an overnight celebrity and her contentious videos "a good publicity stunt".

Century Publications launched its first newspaper in 1998, and it is Pakistan's third-largest newspaper group in terms of circulation. The group publishes an English-language newspaper, *The Express Tribune*, in partnership with *The International Herald Tribune*. Its editorial stance is in line with social liberalism, and enjoys left-wing readership on the political and social spectrum. It has emerged as an advocate for free speech and equality as far as the issue of women rights is concerned. It applauds the laurels of Malala Yousafzai and Nighat Dad who have all been honoured multiple times globally but seldom in Pakistan<sup>11</sup>.

The Herald Group of Publications (PHP) started its flagship newspaper, the daily *Dawn*, in 1941. *Dawn* is famous amongst Pakistan's diplomatic community (Pakistan's Former Ambassador to the US, Sherry Rehman) and decision-makers in public (Former Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Javed Jabbar) and private sectors. The group enjoys widespread respect as a credible, independent and balanced player. It has a vast influence and has emerged as an autonomous and liberal critic of the society. *Dawn* urged the nation to "own Malala's achievements" as evidence that Pakistanis do not shun bold voices. However, media coverage of Pakistani women with international standing remains a challenge. Thomas and Shukul revealed when Taliban shot Yousafzai; *the Dawn* tried to "achieve delicate balancing act without appearing hostile to a potential enemy". While on the other hand, alternative English

media was strident and unbridled enough to condemn right-wing groups and voiced support for Yousafzai<sup>12</sup>.

## Women in Press

Illiteracy, prejudice and gender chauvinism and inequality are the most critical and emerging social challenges faced by women in Pakistan from all segment of society. Due to the religious and cultural norms, cruel practices such as honour killing, acid attacks and domestic violence are widespread. It remains a non-issue unless it takes a severe type of murder or attempted murder. As a result, women's participation in social, economic and political spheres has been substantially curtailed. The National Report of Pakistan for the Fourth UN World Conference for Women admitted that women "continue to suffer because of oppressive patriarchal structures, rigid orthodox norms and stifling socio-cultural customs and traditions"<sup>13</sup>

News of violence against women is substantial not only as it stimulates public debate on pressing social problems, but also because it has a direct impact on governmental policymaking. The news media appears to echo hegemonic ideologies, strengthening and legitimising traditional partisan structures by reinforcing and upholding the status quo and government-sanctioned social norms and beliefs explain that in Pakistan as women are considered weaker than men, it is not expected of them to give a reaction in their defence<sup>14</sup>. Thus they are suffocated. Furthermore, they argue that their deteriorated representation does not permit them to flourish beyond stereotypes and change the negative image of a woman despite all her efforts. Pakistani media showcase women as either submissive sufferers or objects to entertain. Rasul (2008, p. 74) notes that "This media projection is, in fact, a reproduction of the existing and established image of women in our society". This was observed by Yu (2010) in the media coverage of gang rape victim, Mukhtar Mai, as she appeared as a helpless victim desperately seeking the help of western media and human rights organisations. The author argued that Mai was represented as a nervous and sedate woman who gains poise and self-assurance only from international factions. Mai has been bent as a recluse who is at odds with ethos and society; who lacks family support. However, Mia's father and other male figures were a constant source of comfort and courage throughout her suffering and in her quest for justice. The media coverage of the victim remained meek and passive<sup>15</sup>.

Generally, in Pakistan prejudice against women exists in all spheres of life; thus Pakistani newspapers, both English and Urdu, also give biased and prejudiced coverage to women. Discussing the representation of women in the media, Rameez Ul Huda & Ali (2015 p. 15) state "there is a patronising tone in every printed feature, communicating a feeling of inferiority in women". They consider the representation of women in news media as feeble, juvenile and helpless. News stories around professional women are overshadowed and beautified with tales of their marriages, family life and other facets of women's customary roles. Highlighting the example of Benazir Bhutto when she became prime minister of Pakistan; media repeatedly referred to her as "a perfect housewife" "a conscientious mother" that overlooked her role in politics<sup>16</sup>.

Similar traits can be untangled in news media depictions of female politicians, as more prone towards costume and physical appearance than on substance and achievement. For example the first woman Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Hina Rabbani Khar was labeled as “the most fashionable”<sup>17</sup>, “4th Most Stylish Women in Politics”<sup>18</sup>, and “an epitome of grace”<sup>19</sup>. She has repeatedly been targeted for her branded wardrobe, from her Cavalli sunglasses to her Birkin bag. Being from a patriarchal society, women have been stereotyped as weak and submissive on the one hand and object of beauty on the other. (Rasul, 2009)

Khan & Anwar (2013) and Ullah, Khan, Khan, & Ibrahim (2016) argue that despite the growth in the social status of women over time, gender stereotyping remains same. News media is not presenting women in diverse roles, and their contributions to society remain unnoticed. Media has been showcasing women as men deem fit- dependent, caregivers, good-looking and homemakers. Khan & Anwar (2013) refer to this representation as “the beauty and the beast”; where the beauty has finite concerns although males are described as the beast who can control this beauty by physical and mental strengths<sup>20</sup>.

Mojiz (2016) notes that Pakistani females are getting media’s attention but not primarily in an active context. Patriarchal attitudes towards women reflect them at the bottomend of the power-compliance dynamic. Womenfolk are perceived and treated as ‘victims’ as well as ‘objects’ and remain deprived of active power. There are exceptions, but it is too early to celebrate.

This research explores the contribution of these newspapers to public debate and the extent to which the diversity of news sources has led to more diverse viewpoints. This project analyses significant gender debates in the English press and studies the reportage on renowned Pakistani women in specific by including the case study of an Oscar-winning filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy and Pakistan’s only female Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar to explore press attitudes towards women. This research project examines the way these English-language media function as an arena for debate and considers the way these newspapers open up spaces for opinions and arguments on gender issues, yet also limit and contain these views, and promote particular voices.

This study analyses the portrayal of candid women in the English newspapers and investigates how news media coverage varies for professional Pakistani women. My broad research questions are the following:

- RQ-1: How has the English-language press articulated debates about women in Pakistan?
- RQ-2: What does news content in the English-language press reveal about Pakistani women of international standing who challenge the social norms?
- RQ-3: Is Pakistan an anti-women society?

The time frame is distributed around the critical media incidents of Hina Rabbani Khar (HRK) and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy (SOC). For HKR two critical events

were her when she became the First Female Foreign minister of Pakistan closely followed by her visit to India in July 2011 and the second event being her famous interview with Al-Jazeera in December 2015. However, the critical event for SOC includes the first Oscar in October 2013 and the second Oscar in 2016 being the second significant event when she came into limelight.

This study is a content analysis of Pakistan's four English-language newspapers, *The News*, *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune* and *The Nation*. Selection of publications was by their circulation and reputation as the leading and influential English-language newspapers. Another factor for their choice is their archive availability.

The study takes an objective explanation of newspaper content by analyzing newspaper reports, opinion articles, feature stories, editorials and letters-to-editor from four English-language newspapers in Pakistan. Opinion articles and editorials were included because they are more likely to have a bias and stir debate in masses. These not only give the masses the knowledge and information about issues but also the masses get the idea of the amount of worth to place on any issue due to the exposure given by the media to that particular issue. Op-eds are the sections for supporting ideas and supporting debate on essential matters. Currently, Pakistani editorials function in the manner that they are the places where newspapers speak out their viewpoints on the most pertinent issues the nation encounters while performing their functions to influence the public and the government who have the knowledge of the matter and understand the perspective as realistic.

Discourse analysis will enable me to comment on the inherent meaning of newspaper content. Discourse means merely language-in-use (Gee, 2005) (Ullah, 2013). It is a way of talking and thinking (Roberts, 2009). Using discourse analysis as the methodology the research will try to investigate the underlying meaning, gender power relation in newspapers images and texts. It is reiterated that the article used discourse in the Foucauldian fashion. Michel Foucault (1977) argued that discourses that are available in society govern what can be thought and said. Drawing on Foucault, it is argued that discourses are bedrocks of social reality. It is within discourses that we create objects and types of people and social roles. (Ullah, Khan, Khan, & Ibrahim, 2016) News frames will be used to understand the way stories, and issues are identified, perceived, contested, or the subject of debate and arguments in print. News framing refers to the way in which news media organise and present news to convey a specific message. The media framing makes certain aspects of an event or issues more salient than the others. In news writing, frames are manifested by the use of specific words and phrases that reinforce particular ideas at the cost of other ideas. Therefore, it resembles agenda-setting in which media builds public perception. Media frames play a vital role in: stimulating opposition to or support for an event or issue; providing moral judgment; representing a specific ideology, and determining the 'tone' of media coverage of an event or issue.

Frame classification was according to the overall tone of the media reports - positive, negative and neutral. Positive reports support the issue. Negative stories are those critical towards the topic. Neutral stands for a general stance which is merely interpretative without having any 'positive' or 'negative' elements.

For data analysis, articles were primarily coded as 'positive' 'negative' and 'neutral'. Later 'positive' and 'negative' frames were further divided to decipher the extent of these frames which helped analyse the trends in the print media.

## Findings and Discussion

Further analysis of these frames revealed that Khar referred to as incompetent 61% to hold the office as Foreign Minister who was repeatedly targeted for her feudal background made her unprofessional 22%. The Express Tribune remains the only newspaper that has covered HRK while all others remained mostly mute or ignorant of the female Minister. Khar has been a subject of a lot of criticism since the appointment as the Foreign Minister in 2011, even though she had been actively participating in politics since 2002 while serving the Economic and Finance ministries. The Express Tribune (2011)<sup>21</sup> stated, "her election was more because of her family's cloud and less because of her own popularity" and called her political career to be "compromised" and "not-taken-seriously". Though it is not uncommon for political families in Pakistan to have their children engaged and serve political offices yet news media has repeatedly taken a turn to overshadow her achievements with her family background. Her visit to India in July 2011 was merely a commentary on her fashion sense rather than her portrayal as an active Foreign Minister on a mission. Dawn (2011) referred to her as "Pakistan bomb" while Express Tribune discussed her age and youthfulness highlighting the fact she was given the office to give a "soft image" of Pakistan. Hussain (2011) used satire in his commentary to HKR's flaunting fashion and brand showcasing. He termed HKR's appointment as "mango diplomacy" while underlying that Pakistan's foreign policy is dictation from the US. While on HRK's visit to India, he wrote "In the days following Bhagat Singh's daring exploits, poet Majaz had advised the beauties of his day to turn the scarf into a flag. These times, however, are different and as the gospels say there is a time to fight and a time to make up. So there is a place for the flag and an occasion for the scarf, and it is best not to mix the two"<sup>22</sup>.

The Nation only covered HRK's Ajmer Sharif's visit where she was photographed wearing an oversized chaddar and praying, highlighting the manifesto of Waqt group. On the other hand, she was again showed incompetent by The News (2015)<sup>23</sup> during the Al-Jazeera interview with Mehdi Hasan, repeatedly highlighting being a female she cannot deal with Pakistan's politics and more importantly the military.

## Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy (SOC)

The mainstream Pakistani English newspapers illustrated multiple frames under three categories of Positive, Negative and Neutral. The findings revealed that a Positive (61%) narrative was built around the achievements of SOC for raising her voice

against the oppression of women in Pakistan, more than Negative (8%) and Neutral (31%). The researcher used multiple frames for each category to further dissect the narratives. For instance, professional, celebrated, work seeking implementations were marked Positive frames. While female objectification, shameful and anti-Pakistan narratives were considered negative. The findings showed that SOC referred to as a celebrity (38%) more than a professional documentary maker who fought for the laments of Pakistani women. Amongst the positive frames print media urged for the implementation (46%) of SOC's work. Dawn published 20 articles on SOC during the selected time frame and applauded SOC more enthusiastically than The News, The Express Tribune and The Nation.

The overall findings showed that she was portrayed positively in the selected newspapers. Due to her commitment to advocate women rights, Premier Nawaz Sharif praised SOC's Oscar win and reiterated, "Women like Ms Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy are not only pride for the Pakistani nation but are also a significant source of contribution towards the march of civilisation in the world"<sup>24</sup>. Following this statement, English print media of Pakistani articulated much debate on the issue urging the government to take "action against a despicable practice" and translate political condemnation into "the legal and administrative changes necessary for putting an end to the impunity that surrounds honour killings". Chairman of the HRCF, Zohra Yusuf said, "He will have to take some bold steps... Words from the PM are not enough"<sup>25</sup>.

Even though on February 29, 2016, We Disown Sharmeen was the top social media trend; the conspiracy narratives of 'attempting to defame Pakistan for personal gains', 'the West wants to embarrass Pakistan' and 'it only highlights the negative aspects of our country' were bashed by Siddiqi (2016), Shahid (2016) and Rehman I. (2016) in the mainstream print media. Arshad (2016) writes, "Journalist, activist and filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy has made us proud by bringing home two Oscars for Pakistan." SOC was applauded for her commitment to documentary making on controversial topics. SOC was cheered for "unveiled the suffering of the vulnerable" (Shahid 2016) at the global level. Her commitment was respected for breaking the stereotypes as she did not remain silent about the violence against women, and refused to accept the menace in the society. Her struggle reflects the plight of many Pakistani women as she vowed to give voice to the marginalised, proposed a tolerant Pakistan and endeavoured to protect the victims of patriarchy. SOC's win was termed as "a great highlight in the fight against the so-called Honor Killings" (Cautain, 2016) as it is perceived that strong notions are forming against prevailing practices of female oppression and finally Pakistan is engaging in lively debates on feminism<sup>26</sup>.

However, after being awarded the Oscar for 'Best Documentary — Short Subject' for *A Girl in the River*, critics denounced SOC for tarnishing Pakistan's image in the world because as Garg (2016) puts it, "After all, the West is known to thrive in third world misery" and Academy Awards, Oscars termed as "White supremacy in a new guise" (Rizvi, 2016). Inferences could be made that she had to come up with socially acceptable topics of debate because Pakistan does not wish for a status quo change. Two critiques surfaced; whereby, the first claims SOC's films only highlight Pakistan's



failings, therefore, building a highly negative narrative about Pakistan. Underlying that these films bring shame to Pakistan, as a result, she was labelled as “a traitor, a Western sellout and a conspirator”<sup>27</sup>

Another argument directed towards SOC is more about the nature of international media's interest in Pakistan. It was repeatedly suggested to overlook the plight of women on social Oscar. SOC's Oscar win was marginalised by outright commentary on her wardrobe selection, which overshadowed the context of debate supporting SOC's achievement. The discussion was slightly shaped to build a perspective that Oscar is a considerable fashion-moment; whereby displaying patriotism through the flaunting of traditional attires. Thus triumphing female objectification and making the Oscar debate a secondary matter. “Sharmeen's entire attire was done by Pakistani designers”. Though it is daunting to connect the glitters to SOC's life with the harsh and crude realities that delineate her work; however, the print media was determined to outline her appearance more important than her work. Rehman (2016) inscribes SOC as “at ease in designer wear on the Oscars red carpet”<sup>28</sup>.

To cash on the Oscar moment, Dawn applauded her choice of clothing for making “a statement without looking over-the-top” and to make the wardrobe issue more pronounced it describes, “the cape makes a statement while also being comfortable.”<sup>29</sup>. While The Express Tribune blares, “Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy dazzles in black at the Oscars” and “it was her statement jewellery pieces that stole the spotlight” (Qamar, 2016). Thus apparently marginalising Pakistani women to be known for anything but the dedication to their profession.

## Conclusion

This article has presented a comparative analysis of 94 newspaper articles on Pakistan's first female Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar and first Oscar filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy. The purpose of this research was to understand the debate Pakistan's leading English Press has articulated around these women of international standing. Through the case studies of these women, this study has also examined the state of Pakistan's attitude towards women. The findings revealed that both these women are targeted for representing Pakistan on two very different forums.

Hina Rabbani Khar has faced criticism on the grounds of incompetence in politics. Negative frames have dominated Hina Rabbani Khar's profile through the print media lens. She is criticised for being inexperienced and young for the position, which is a manifestation of Pakistan's male-dominated political scenario as previously females have not been given the office of Foreign Minister. In a pragmatic sense, the English press has failed to synthesise her incompetence in any other terms rather than her youthfulness. The print media did not spare her after she left the Foreign Ministry and criticised her on a rather eloquent interview with Mehdi Hasan on Al-Jazeera. The tumult that followed the interview is indicative of the fissures in our society regarding women in politics. Pakistani women derive their legitimacy from their relationships with men – as a daughter, mother, wife, sister. An independent woman is seen outside of the paradigm and therefore considered a threat to the ‘normative values’.

On the other hand, the English press has tried not to opt for the conventional approach on Sharmeen Obaid's Oscar win. She is laurelled for her achievement, yet the debate around SOC mostly does not revolve around the recognition of her work. Instead, it is an urge seeking the implementation of her work. Despite the Oscar win, SOC has been labelled as a traitor and Western propaganda to defame Pakistan because her work reflects the unfortunate menace of violence against women in Pakistan.

Far from the acceptance of female leadership, Pakistan's English press has consistently targeted HRK for Birkins, Cavalli, her feudal background and print media has developed an obsession with her outlook rather than her respect as a politician representing Pakistan in international forums. The same narrative was revealed for SOC where her achievements are sidelined, but her life is glamorised and staged. The trait of Tabloid journalism can easily be found in Pakistan's Elite English press, where females are targeted and objectified. However, there is a growing debate on 'place of women' in the media, which signifies that the society is becoming more tolerant towards women in all spheres of life.

## NOTES

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