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"Pulp Fictions": Reading Pakistani Domesticity

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Social Text

Duke University Press

78 (Volume 22, Number 1), Spring 2004

pp. 123-145

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Social Text 22.1 (2004) 123-145

[Access article in PDF]

"Pulp Fictions"

Reading Pakistani Domesticity

Kamran Asdar Ali

Maulvi Saheb saw a packet with monthly *Ismat* printed on it. Beneath it, in red ink, the packet was addressed to Sheikh Irfan ul Haq's daughter. Maulvi Mehrban Ali could not believe his eyes. He forgot his own money order and returned home with a new story to tell. He relayed that a magazine bearing the name of Irfan ul Haq's daughter is lying at the post office to some of the more mature individuals in the neighborhood. But such news cannot be kept from people for long. Soon the news of magazines arriving for Irfan ul Haq's virgin daughter spread like wildfire. Magazines coming for an unmarried daughter itself was embarrassing enough; furthermore, it had the daughter's name on the envelope. Delhi is far away; who knows how many and what kind of men had read her name?

—Intezar Hussein, *Ehsan Manzil*

The above passage is from an Urdu short story by Intezar Hussein.¹ The story narrates the changes within the domestic sphere in Indian Muslim households. Hussein gives us a sense of how religious reform, expanding educational opportunities for both genders, and colonial modernization in the first quarter of the twentieth century undermined and challenged the more traditional aspects of middle-class Muslim life in North India. The community's anxiety over a woman's name being exposed to strangers is echoed in depictions of households from other parts of the Muslim world. For example, Assia Djebar, in her book *Fantasia*, similarly shows how her female relatives in colonial Algeria were scandalized when a postcard sent by her father arrived specifically addressed to her mother. Hence the postcard, letter, or magazine subscription to a woman in the family became a metaphor for modernity, the public and the outside penetrating Muslim moral boundaries and domestic ethos. In this article I seek to understand the process of this change within the social context of contemporary Pakistani domestic space.

I use examples from Urdu fiction in popular women's magazines in order to comprehend how middle- and lower-middle-class literate women articulate notions of family, individuality, and sexual mores in a rapidly changing social and economic milieu of present-day Pakistan.² In short, I will explore how popular Urdu writings tend to inform and represent domestic life. These Urdu magazines, known commonly as *digests*, contain a specific genre of short stories that are considered far below the highbrow [End Page 123] literary production of more established yet less commercially successful literary journals. The closest translation of these narratives into a Euro-American idiom would be to compare them with Harlequin romances or television soaps. As these writings reflect women's traditional roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, and predominantly portray women as sexually naive, passive, and submissive in their relationships to men, the similarities to Western romances are obvious. However, the comparison does not quite capture the particularity of the genre itself, which has deep social and cultural links to the development of the modern Urdu short story and also historically to the specifically women-oriented narratives of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century North India.³ This said, as much as these writings retain a dialogic relationship with high literary forms, they have in recent years attained a polyphonic tendency that contains a semblance of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1968); a carnival that typically combines critique and "indecent" that Rabelais relied on for his source (Willis 1989, 130). The multiplicity of voices and themes invoked in this genre have strains of the older oral tradition of women's storytelling and other forms of popular performances. That tradition, as Sumanta Banerjee (1990) shows for late-nineteenth-century Calcutta, included the transformation of the rural folk culture of songs, dances, theatrical performances, and recitations by the newly urbanizing poor men and women. These popular creative expressions were condemned by the modernizing Indian elite and colonial officials as "vulgar and voluptuous" (Banerjee 1990), as they had not yet been disciplined and sanitized by the more...

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