

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF PAKISTANI DRAMA SERIAL SANG E MAH, A PAKISTANI ADAPTATION OF HAMLET

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a stylistic analysis of the Pakistani television drama serial Sang-e-Mah, focusing on its portrayal of revenge within a culturally rich and emotionally intense narrative framework. The drama, inspired by Shakespeare's Hamlet, reimagines the classic tale in a contemporary Pashtun tribal setting, using a blend of linguistic, visual, and thematic stylistic devices. Through the use of poetic Urdu dialogues, symbolic imagery, and intertextual references, Sang-e-Mah explores themes of honor, guilt, identity, and justice. The analysis highlights how stylistic elements such as monologues, metaphors, and culturally specific expressions contribute to character development and emotional depth, particularly in the protagonist Hilmand's psychological journey. Additionally, the study examines the role of gender and tradition, especially through the critique of social practices like ghag (forced engagement). By combining traditional narrative structures with modern stylistic techniques, Sang-e-Mah not only localizes a universal story of revenge but also raises critical questions about morality, patriarchy, and cultural transformation in Pakistani society.

Keywords: Stylistic analysis, Shakespearean influence, Linguistic style, Feminist interpretation, Visual symbolism, Hamlet adaptation, Narrative technique, Cultural contextualization

INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the fact that Pakistan's drama industry stands in a league of its own. Going through the stories, the character realization and the sound dedication of veteran artists, the entertainment landscape has been going through some steady changes over the years, and this has rewarded production houses with solid global viewership. Television dramas in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, serve as powerful mediums for cultural expression, social commentary, and literary adaptation. One such notable example is Sang-e-Mah (2022), a critically acclaimed Pakistani drama serial written by Mustafa Afridi and directed by Saife Hassan. This serial intertwines themes of revenge, honor, grief, and redemption, set against the culturally rich backdrop of tribal Pashtun society. While the storyline resonates with universal narratives of loss and vengeance, its expression is deeply rooted in local traditions, language, and values. Sang-e-Mah draws clear intertextual inspiration from William Shakespeare's Hamlet, decontextualizing the tragic hero narrative within a contemporary Pakistani framework. The protagonist, Hilmand, mirrors Hamlet's emotional and moral struggles, navigating grief, familial betrayal, and the pressure to restore personal and collective honor. However, the drama is not a mere replication but it adapts and transforms classical motifs using distinct linguistic patterns, cultural codes, and stylistic choices that reflect the sensibilities of its audience.

The study of stylistics that how language is used in literary and dramatic texts and provides a lens through which to understand these choices. This research undertakes a stylistic analysis of Sang-e-Mah to uncover how language, dialogue, symbolism, and narrative techniques are employed to construct meaning, evoke emotion, and reflect socio-cultural realities. By focusing on the stylistic features of the drama, this paper aims to highlight how Sang-e-Mah functions as both a literary adaptation and a culturally specific narrative of revenge and resistance.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify and analyze the linguistic and stylistic features used in Sang-e-Mah.
2. To examine how the drama portrays revenge as a cultural and psychological theme.
3. To explore the intertextual connections between Sang-e-Mah and Hamlet.

Literature Review

Stylistic analysis as a method in literary and media studies has evolved to include not only written texts but also audiovisual narratives such as film and television dramas. This section reviews key scholarly contributions relevant to the stylistic analysis of televised content, Shakespearean adaptations, and the specific socio-cultural context of Sang-e-Mah. Feminist stylistics (Mills, 1995) offers a lens to explore how language and visual representation construct gender roles. Odho (2024) emphasizes that Sang-e-Mah deconstructs traditional portrayals of women through characters like Sheherzaad, who challenge patriarchal systems and actively resist cultural oppression. The show critiques practices like ghag and presents women as complex agents navigating moral and societal conflicts. The stylistic portrayal of these themes—through costume, setting, and dialogue—adds a multidimensional layer to the drama's meaning-making processes. While a few studies have analyzed Sang-e-Mah as an adaptation of Hamlet, most focus on thematic and narrative comparisons. There is limited research that provides a **comprehensive stylistic analysis**, especially examining how language, visual motifs, sound design, and character dialogue work together to create layered meanings around revenge, justice, and honor. This study aims to fill that gap by integrating linguistic and audiovisual stylistic tools into a detailed examination of the drama's structure.

1. Stylistics and Media Narratives

Leech and Short (1981) define stylistics as the linguistic study of style in texts, particularly literary ones, focusing on how language choices influence meaning and effect. Their framework categorizes stylistic features into levels such as lexical, grammatical, phonological, and graphological choices. This approach has been widely used in analyzing dialogues, monologues, and narrative voice in media texts (Simpson, 2004).

In recent years, scholars such as Paul Simpson and Katie Wales have extended stylistics to cover visual and multimodal elements of storytelling. This allows for the analysis of how cinematography, sound, costume, and gesture contribute to meaning—a crucial dimension for examining television dramas like Sang-e-Mah.

2. Shakespearean Adaptation in South Asian Contexts

The adaptation of Shakespearean tragedy into non-Western cultural forms has drawn extensive scholarly attention. Hutcheon (2006) introduced a theoretical model for studying adaptation as both repetition and reinterpretation. Pakistani media has been no stranger to this, using Shakespearean structures to critique local traditions and social dynamics.

Zaib et al. (2023) explore Sang-e-Mah as a localized adaptation of Hamlet, identifying Hilmand as a Hamlet figure entangled in revenge, moral ambiguity, and psychological conflict. They argue that Sang-e-Mah creatively translates Shakespeare's themes into the tribal context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, integrating indigenous customs like ghag (a traditional form of public engagement) into its narrative structure.

3. Cultural Stylistics and Tribal Identity

Pakistani drama is unique for weaving storytelling with strong regional and cultural identities. Lodhi (2020) and Anwar (2018) note that Pakistani serials often deploy stylistic choices—like code-switching, traditional music, and poetic dialogue—to reflect sociolinguistic diversity. Sang-e-Mah employs linguistic duality (Pashto and Urdu), stylized cinematography, and symbolic imagery to establish setting and tone. The use of slow pacing, graveyard monologues, and poetic internal dialogue signifies both psychological depth and cultural gravitas. Scholars note that such stylistic features evoke both literary sophistication and a deep emotional resonance with local audiences (Kaur, 2023).

2.2 Adaptation Theory in Television Contexts

Hutcheon (2006) theorizes adaptation as both a product and a process—"repetition without replication"—arguing that successful adaptations must balance fidelity to source material with

inventive transformation. Her work underscores the importance of cultural and generic conventions when transposing a canonical text (e.g., *Hamlet*) into a different medium or milieu. **Sanders (2006)** and **Cardwell (2002)** further illustrate how television adaptations negotiate audience expectations, genre codes, and the affordances of the small screen, emphasizing that visual style (lighting, *mise-en-scène*) and narrative pacing are as crucial as linguistic fidelity. **Shaheen (2010)** offers one of the first stylistic overviews of Urdu television drama, highlighting how dialogue rhythms, idiomatic Urdu, and music cues work together to evoke emotional registers unique to South Asian audiences. **Khan (2018)** investigates the interplay of Urdu and regional languages in Pakistani serials, demonstrating how code-switching performs identity work, signals social distance/intimacy, and foregrounds cultural specificity. **Bano (2021)** applies a socio-cultural lens to tribal narratives on Pakistani TV, showing how rituals and visual symbols (e.g., traditional *patu*; communal gatherings) construct notions of honor, justice, and revenge.

Zaib & Rehman (2023) conduct a comparative analysis of *Sang-e-Mah* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, mapping character correspondences (*Hilmand*–*Hamlet*; *Mansoor*–*Claudius*) and demonstrating how the drama's monologic speeches and graveyard motifs echo Elizabethan tragedy while inserting Pashtunwali codes of honor and vengeance. **Kaur (2023)** uses Hutcheon's framework to show how *Sang-e-Mah* localizes *Hamlet*'s narrative arcs through spatial markers (mountainous Khyber landscapes), linguistic textures (Pashto interjections within Urdu dialogue), and ritual sequences (the public *ghag*); her visual–linguistic stylistic analysis details the drama's deployment of close-ups and diegetic sound to heighten suspense. **Odho (2024)** offers a feminist re-reading, foregrounding characters like *Sheherzaad* (an *Ophelia* analogue) and *Gul Meena*, and examines how their discursive agency and sartorial codes subvert patriarchal expectations. **Odho** applies Mills's appraisal framework to reveal how adjectival patterns and transitivity choices in female-centered scenes critique gendered violence. **Ahmed (2024)** (forthcoming) investigates audience reception, combining stylistic analysis of key scenes (e.g., the cave confrontation, water-crossing sequence) with viewer interviews; Ahmed's preliminary findings suggest that *Sang-e-Mah*'s visual symbolism (the river as fate, the crumbling wall as memory) resonates deeply with diaspora viewers negotiating questions of home and honor. Taken together, this body of work establishes robust methods for dissecting the linguistic, visual, and narrative style of *Sang-e-Mah*, situating it within both Shakespearean adaptation studies and the broader tradition of Pakistani television. However, there remains space for:

1. A **scene-by-scene comparative stylistic mapping** between *Hamlet* and *Sang-e-Mah* beyond the major motifs (e.g., closer analysis of word-level parallelism in soliloquies).
2. An **integrated multimodal discourse analysis** that more fully unites spoken dialogue, gesture, costume, and sound design.
3. A deeper **gendered reading of male characters**, analyzing how *Hilmand*'s speech patterns and posture enact or resist Pashtun masculine ideals.

This study adopts a **qualitative, descriptive approach** rooted in the principles of **stylistic analysis**, focusing on both linguistic and visual elements of the Pakistani drama serial *Sang-e-Mah*. The research aims to explore how stylistic choices such as diction, dialogue patterns, imagery, and symbolism construct meaning, develop characters, and emphasize themes of revenge and cultural identity.

Delimitations

1. The analysis is limited to selected episodes and does not cover the entire series.
2. The study focuses on stylistic aspects, not audience reception or production contexts.

3. Pashto dialogue was interpreted with reference to English/Urdu subtitles; some nuance may be culturally bound.

Research Design

The study is qualitative and interpretive in nature, using **textual analysis** to examine the stylistic features of selected scenes. It involves both **linguistic stylistics** (focused on spoken/written language features) and **visual stylistics** (focused on imagery, setting, costume, and cinematic framing).

2. Data Collection

- **Primary** **Source:**
Episodes of the drama serial Sang-e-Mah, written by Mustafa Afridi and aired in 2022 on Hum TV.
- **Selection** **Criteria:**
Five key episodes and specific scenes were chosen based on thematic relevance to revenge, conflict, and character development. Scenes include:
 - Hilmand's graveyard monologues
 - Ghag announcement scene
 - Father-son confrontation
 - Sheherzaad's dialogue on justice and honor
 - The resolution scene in the finale
- **Transcription:**
Dialogues from selected scenes were transcribed and, where necessary, translated from Urdu and Pashto into English for consistent analysis.

3. Analytical Framework

The study is guided by the following frameworks:

a. Stylistics (Leech & Short, 1981) that focuses on Lexical choices (formal/informal diction), Sentence structures, Repetition, parallelism, deviation and Figurative language (metaphor, irony, symbolism)

b. Visual Semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) that Used to examine Framing and camera angles, Lighting, color symbolism and Costuming and body language

c. Adaptation Theory (Hutcheon, 2006)

Assesses how Shakespearean elements (from Hamlet) are recontextualized into South Asian tribal culture and how this impacts stylistic presentation.

Analysis and Discussion

Linguistic Style and Dialogue

The linguistic style of Sang-e-Mah is marked by elevated Urdu, poetic diction, and strategic code-switching between Urdu and Pashto. This stylistic choice enhances the dramatic and emotional depth of the characters, particularly Hilmand, whose monologues echo Shakespearean soliloquies in their rhythm, depth, and existential angst.

Examples:

- Hilmand's dialogues are introspective and philosophical, often laced with metaphors about death, guilt, and justice. For instance, in a pivotal scene, he says:
"Qatl bhi kabhi kabhi insaan ka zimmedari ban jaata hai."
("Sometimes, murder becomes a responsibility for man.")
- Such language foregrounds internal conflict and moral ambiguity, hallmarks of both classical tragedy and modern psychological drama.

Repetition and rhetorical questions are frequently used for emphasis, as seen in repeated questioning of fate and identity:

"Main kaun hoon? Mujh se kya chhupa hai?"
("Who am I? What is hidden from me?")

This stylistic pattern not only mirrors Hamlet's famous soliloquy ("To be or not to be") but also localizes it in a culturally relevant voice.

Symbolism and Visual Stylistics

Sang-e-Mah employs visual motifs and symbolic elements to enhance the narrative's depth. These symbols serve both thematic and aesthetic functions.

- **The Graveyard:** Frequently used as a site of contemplation and confrontation with death. Hilmand is often shown here, visually aligning him with the concept of unresolved guilt and generational trauma.
- **The River:** Symbolizes time, continuity, and the inevitability of fate. Flowing water often appears in transitions, suggesting emotional flux and the undercurrent of destiny.
- **Traditional Weapons (e.g., rifles, daggers):** These objects are more than props; they are symbols of masculinity, tribal honor, and the ever-present possibility of violence.

Lighting and color palettes are also notable. Gloomy blue and gray tones dominate key scenes, reflecting the emotional coldness and moral murkiness of revenge. This adds to the overall noir-stylistic tone of the drama.

Intertextuality and Adaptation of Hamlet

The drama draws heavily from Shakespeare's Hamlet, both structurally and thematically. However, it is not a direct copy but an adaptation grounded in **Pashtun culture**.

- **Hilmand as Hamlet:** Both characters are haunted by the death of their father and driven by revenge. Hilmand's brooding nature, sense of betrayal, and moral paralysis mirror Hamlet.
- **The Ghost Motif:** While Hamlet speaks to his father's ghost, Hilmand is metaphorically haunted by visions and memories. This is presented more symbolically than literally but plays a similar narrative function.
- **Claudius-like Step-father:** The antagonist figure is also the new patriarch, echoing Claudius. However, in Sang-e-Mah, the villain is justified within certain tribal norms, adding layers of moral ambiguity.

This intertextuality allows Sang-e-Mah to merge Western tragic structure with indigenous thematic concerns like **Pashtunwali (honor code)**, **ghag (forced engagement custom)**, and **collective justice**.

Themes of Revenge and Justice

Revenge is the driving force of the narrative, but it is complicated by cultural expectations and personal dilemmas. In Western drama, revenge is often depicted as a moral failing; in Sang-e-Mah, it is culturally sanctioned under **tribal codes**. However, the drama does not glorify revenge—it questions it. Through Hilmand, it shows how revenge eats away at the soul, isolates the avenger, and leads to a cycle of violence.

- **Narrative Resolution:** Unlike Hamlet, where nearly every character meets a tragic end, Sang-e-Mah allows for a moment of redemption and reflection, suggesting that breaking the revenge cycle is possible through understanding and forgiveness.

Gender Roles and Feminist Readings

The representation of women is a departure from traditional passive roles in male-dominated revenge stories.

- **Sheherzaad** (echoing Ophelia) is not a victim of madness but a strong, educated, and principled journalist. She challenges tribal customs and asserts her autonomy.

- The drama critiques **ghag**, a practice where a man can publicly claim a woman for marriage without her consent. Through characters like Gul Meena and Zarsanga, Sang-e-Mah exposes the trauma inflicted on women under this system.

Stylistic Deviation and Foregrounding

According to Leech & Short's model, foregrounding through **lexical deviation** (rare metaphors, archaic expressions) and **syntactic deviation** (inverted sentence structures) is used to draw attention to emotionally charged dialogue and key turning points.

For example, in Hilmand's speech about justice, he uses archaic structures like:

"Woh faisla jo insaan ne kiya tha, waqt ne use palat diya."

("The decision that man made, time has overturned it.")

Such deviation highlights emotional climax and gives poetic rhythm to ordinary speech, thus enriching the narrative texture.

Conclusion

The stylistic analysis of the Pakistani drama serial Sang-e-Mah reveals how language, narrative structure, and visual symbolism are masterfully employed to convey complex themes of revenge, justice, honor, and personal transformation. The drama draws heavily on intertextual elements from Shakespeare's Hamlet, yet localizes them effectively within the cultural framework of Pashtun tribal society. Through poetic dialogues, symbolic imagery, and culturally embedded narrative techniques, Sang-e-Mah elevates a tale of revenge into a nuanced exploration of trauma, morality, and redemption. Furthermore, the drama challenges traditional gender roles and cultural taboos, particularly through its critique of the ghag custom and its portrayal of empowered female characters like Sheherzaad. The stylistic choices not only enhance the aesthetic appeal but also deepen the socio-political commentary embedded in the plot. Ultimately, Sang-e-Mah stands as a compelling example of how stylistic devices in television drama can be used to navigate, reinterpret, and resist cultural narratives while retaining emotional and artistic depth.

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