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NEGOTIATING MORAL RESPONSIBILITY: THE JUSTIFIABILITY OF FALAK, MANSHA, AND TASEER IN THE PAKISTANI DRAMA JAANUM

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Abstract

In the Pakistani TV serial drama, problems of morality, gender, trust, individual agency and responsibility are frequently dealt with in the context of domestic relations. The film Jaanum directed by Owais Khan stands out as Fatima Shahid's debut film. Fatima Shahid's Jaanum can be considered as the main reason as it shows films that question the basic line up for right and wrong. Initially in the drama, Rizwan Taseer and his wife Falak are a couple whose connection is based on accepting support and trust. When Arif the childhood friend of Taseer returns to the city, seeking monetary and emotional aid, in this equilibrium Taseer tries to provide Arif shelter. Taseer's balance is upset when Arif, Taseer's childhood friend, returns to the city for money and emotional support and shelter and Taseer extends an invitation to shelter Arif. Arif is seen as a threat to Taseer's's safety and security at home by his wife Falak and he thinks that her attempt to get rid of the haughty, conceited fat Rasheed translates to the icky one is a menace' in Episode 1, Jaanum. In this battle, Mansha plays another crucial role, as she comes to terms with personal autonomy, family expectations and the individuals she interacts with. The present paper is an attempt to talk about Falak, Mansha and Taseer based on differences between the intention, circumstance and knowledge and consequence and the moral justifiability. It says that rather than being totally right or totally wrong, none of the three characters can be characterised in such a way. The perils of suspicion, the morality of generosity toward upsetting one's boundaries, and the struggle to remain an individual in a familial context, all have an element of truth in them in Falak's case. In Mansha's case, the morality behind choosing to be a member of the family without offending family members is equally complicated. Thus, Jaanum brings to fore morality as relational, contextual and contested, not absolute.

Keywords: Jaanum, Pakistani drama, moral agency, Falak, Mansha, Taseer, gender, trust, domesticity

Introduction

In South Asia, the family has always occupied a symbolic and narrative space in formal narratives such as television dramas to debate over bigger issues of morality and social relations. Domestic conflicts are particularly important in this regard as Pakistani dramas often provide ample opportunity to explore themes related to marriage and gender issues as well as issues of class, social expectation, individual freedom and loyalty. The film *Jaanum* (by director Owais Khan) is one such film in the tradition, which at the same time adds some complexities. In 2014, the drama was aired on A-Plus and cast members include Saba Qamar, Adnan Siddiqui, Noman Masood, Meera Sethi and Ali Safina (reviewit). The relationship between Rizwan Taseer and Falak is central amongst the relationship in the drama. “This serial based on a romantic and a beautiful love story in which Mira Sethi, Saba Qamar, and Adnan Siddique played leading roles”. (pakistani.pk) Taseer is shown as a viable businessman, while Falak is a woman who thinks differently about politics and is a drama director. At the beginning they live in harmony in their marriage and are supported, trusted and rely on each other ("*Jaanum* - Episode 1"). When Taseer's childhood friend Arif comes back to Pakistan due to financial and emotional problems, it unravels. Taseer thinks that he is helping a friend in distress and lets Arif stay in his house. Falak feels threatened by Arif's presence, however, Taseer not recognizing the danger that Falak feels to his presence ("*Jaanum* - Episode 1"). The ensuing battle is no ordinary one between the ringed wife and the faithful husband. It's an argument over the issue of responsibility. Taseer considers “friendship a moral duty”, and Falak considers “marriage and security in homeland” a kind of duty as well. The human language of Mansha, on the other hand, is embedded in the larger context of familial language development, and as a result, is unique in what ways it is perceived as an agency. In episode-5, for instance, Mansha is introduced as a woman, who caught up with her career and independence but was also aware of her family expectations and relations ("*Jaanum* - Episode 5"). In the light of their motives, situations, beliefs and duties, therefore, the present study poses an identifiable question: ‘Is their behaviour morally honest for the following three individuals: Falak', ‘Mansha' and ‘Taseer'?

The word justifiability is always used in preference to ‘rightness'. Moral justification does not necessarily mean that an action is completely correct. An individual could be as much as performing from a rationally understood purpose and still creating detrimental outcomes. On the other hand, something which, at first glance seems doubtful can be explained after thought is given to the context in which it took place. This is the dramatic flair that *Jaanum* has.

The Concept of Moral Justifiability

It is difficult to have a moral judgment if character is judged by his or her visible behaviour. For ethical interpretation, it is important that the intention, circumstance, knowledge and consequences be considered. It is not possible to "judge" a person that acts on incomplete information in the same way that one does for a person who has complete information. It is more so to *Jaanum*. The information of the characters is not always equal. Taseer has known Arif from his childhood and hence is personally confident of his trustworthiness, while Falak is not. Arif's presence on the other hand is felt from within the domestic space by Falak and their reactions are consequently to different circumstances which Taseer perceives as such. It is explicitly marked up with Falak feeling threatened by Arif and Taseer being oblivious of his friend's evil tries ("*Jaanum* - Episode 1"). The drama thus produces what amounts to ‘asymmetrical knowledge'. All characters have only a piece of the truth. This means that moral judgements may be difficult to make if they are absolute. The three questions that can be asked of the three central figures (then and now) are:

What is the character thinking or feeling he/she is doing?

What are those circumstances?

What are the outcomes of the decision?

This way, the characters can be examined as thoroughly as possible as individuals who represent both good and evil.

A film of suspicion, boundaries of protection, a film of Falak



Figure 1:Falak and Taseer in Jaanum

Source: A-Plus Entertainment episode material.

Falak is actually one of the three characters that is most openly suspicious, and it is easy to see that that is jealousy. This sort of meaning, however, can make her into an emotion-stricken type defying all description. The drama starts with Falak being a professionally active and high-minded lady who was initially married under the thinking of mutual support and trust ("*Jaanum* - Episode 1"). If being uncomfortable around Arif is an issue and is not construed as a single occurrence of possessiveness, then all the better for the detection of the same. If it was a reason for a woman to feel uncomfortable around Arif, then maybe it won't be present in a marital relationship because it wouldn't face the problem while being the matter of a crime. Taseer introduces Arif to the home-life which shakes the home boundaries for Falak. The narrative of Taseer is mostly about friendship; one of his youthful friends has been having monetary and emotional troubles, thus aiding him is a work of compassion ("*Jaanum* - Episode 1"). However, Falak has a lack in emotional history with Arif. So, her impression of herself is different. As far as her suspicion is a reaction to a perceived threat to her marriage and domestic security, it can be deemed morally sound. Do not discount one's uncomfortable feelings because another person may not think so. Meanwhile, the moral justification of a feeling is not entitled to justify any action that comes out of that feeling. The suspicion can be well-founded in the initial stages and can become harmful when not monitored nor communicated with. It is perhaps the moral complexity of Falak that is the reason for this division. Her heads are not in the right space here, and the drama also illustrates of how insecurity can lead to other misjudgements. Therefore, her character is in some sense ethically in the middle – her perception is given credit, but her perception alone is not proof of wrongdoing.Falak also has a moral significance because of her being a stand in for "agency" within the domestic sphere. She is not just a passive wife. She translates, analyzes, inquires and replies. The above can then be interpreted as a claim to decisions expected to impact her personal rather than domestic sphere and one where she feels she fits into it. This resistance to situations which do not suit her can then be taken to mean statements of her entitlement to access to decisions which could affect her personal sphere rather than her home sphere, where she feels she fits in.

Taseer: Friendship, Generosity, and Marital Responsibility

Taseer's moral side is a little easier to uphold. He helps Arif out because they are friends and have two things in common: considerations of friendship, consideration of compassion. After her financial

and emotional failure, Arif comes home from Taseer's home ("*Jaanum* - Episode 1"). On a regular level of moral duty, aiding a distressed pal is not an incorrect thing to do. The moral dilemma of Taseer's situation, in fact, is that at first, his good intentions are justifiable. It's not like he wants to help Arif per se. However, he has a dilemma from two different areas; he has to be friendly with Arif and be responsible for Falak. The importance of Taseer's trust in his friend is constantly highlighted in the drama. But, it is the very same trust that becomes an issue when Taseer is unable to understand the difference between how Falak sees these things. He is not strong at recognizing the perception of another. This is what is important, as Taseer is far from being a mere observer. His impertinent intervention has an impact on Falak's domestic situation. He thus has a moral responsibility to take her concerns into account. The complex web of interaction and relationship between Taseer and Mansha are demonstrated in episode 5. In Mansha's "*Jaanum* - Episode 5", she thanks Taseer for helping out her father in his time of need, adding that it had helped him in not just monetary aspects but also emotionally. In this episode, the thought of Taseer's generosity will become a constant feature of his characterization, rather than a one-off affair towards Arif. Taseer is thus a character driven by good intentions of improving others. But, *Jaanum* shows that intentions do not take away responsibility of the consequences. His moral failing is that he didn't manage to be chivalrous and fraternal to his wife and state duties. He assumes his intentions towards Arif are good, he should share his interpretation of that. The drama is based on challenging this assumption. Thus, Taseer's conduct on this occasion is certainly understandable and morally right but it is not morally perfect.

Mansha: Personal Agency and Familial Expectations



Figure 2:Mansha in Jaanum

Source: A-Plus Entertainment episode material.

So, Mansha brings another flavour to the issue of moral responsibility. While the issue of marriage, trust, and domestic boundaries is central to the Falak-Taseer conflict, Mansha's character is tightly linked with issues relating to independence, one's job and family expectations. Episode 5 offers valuable evidence in particular to thrive her stance. Mansha says that she loves to go shopping on her own and later speaks about working there at Taseer's office too. Her answers reveal a longing for independence, as well as knowledge of familial relations and duties of responsibility in "*Jaanum* – Episode 5". Additionally, the episode also shows that Mansha is indebted to Taseer for his previous help in her father's campaign. She makes expression of thanks to him for his help during the difficult time and appreciates the support he gave to her family to navigate through the crisis together as a family ("*Jaanum* - Episode 5"). This puts a serious moral twist on the whole thing because Mansha's attraction to Taseer is not only based on personal preference but also influenced by the positive

feelings of gratitude. Thus, Mansha's agency has its obligations networked. Her character can be understood in terms of operation of agency that is constrained. She can make choices, but these are influenced by her family, her sense of gratitude, her social and cultural context and her relationships. But it does not imply that Mansha is not an agent. Instead, her fiscal hurries and hurdles are a clear show of her sense of individuality. In Episode 16, for example, she has quite clearly indicated that she is competent to make her own decisions, rather than those for her (Jaanam - Episode 16). This is an important instance in the moral characterization of her character. But Mansha's claim for autonomy is defensible on moral grounds as personal agency is one of the factors of individual dignity. Autonomy from responsibility does not necessarily imply negative implications to others and meaning agency does not equate with autonomy from responsibility. Thus, the character of Mansha is more nuanced than the opposition of belief and action. She is not only compliant, but also not rebellious. Rather, it is a game that she has to play of independence and of relational responsibilities.

Three Characters, Three Moral Frameworks

The moral structure of *Jaanum* becomes clearer when the three characters are examined comparatively:

Character	Primary moral concern	Source of justification	Central ethical problem
Falak	Marital security and trust	Her perception of a threat to domestic boundaries	Suspicion may exceed available evidence
Taseer	Friendship and responsibility	His desire to help a distressed friend	His trust may cause him to overlook Falak's concerns
Mansha	Personal autonomy and family relationships	Her desire to make decisions about her own life	Individual freedom exists alongside familial obligations

This comparison does not reflect a moral superiority of one character over the other, but rather a comparison between two characters. Instead, it's a portrayal of the different definitions of responsibility that each character is using.

Falak emphasizes security.

Taseer emphasizes loyalty.

Mansha emphasizes autonomy.

However, the principles are in contrast at times, which creates a dramatic conflict.

Trust and the Ethics of Listening

The ethic considered most salient and mentioned widely in *Jaanum* is the question of trust. The two have a common history in which Taseer believes in Arif. But Falak does not have the same grounds for trust. The difference between Giving your Trust to a Person, versus another Person's perception is important. Taseer does not want Falak to not trust his judgment, while Falak does not want her own judgment to not be considered. This results in a problem with communication. If the writer of this drama, Taseer, had been treating Falak's concerns as information instead of just simply 'emotional resistance', then there could have been a central conflict (midway story problems) to this drama that would have been much lesser. Analogously, the same goes for Falak's position when she tries to voice her fears and worries instead of just suspecting. So, *Jaanum* makes listening something that you ought to do. Loyalty is not the only component of marriage; it's equally important to recognize that a spouse is going through the same circumstance in an entirely different way. A moral collapse in this circumstance does not necessarily reflect by intentional wrongdoing. What is perhaps the true source of horror may be more a lack of listening

Gender, Marriage, and the Right to Define Threat

There is also a gender reading to Falak's character. In traditional domestic story, suspicions of the woman are frequently portrayed as jealousy and the man's self-assurance as rationality. *Jaanum*

makes this distinction a bit more complex. A professional woman of the street, Falak is introduced as an open-minded drama director ('*Jaanum* - Episode 1'). The background to her profession is that she is attempting to answer to a question that has been asked a foundational way with her answer being only, "her response was just that of a possessive wife." Again, her pain poses another set of questions: Who is responsible for determining whether someone's home is a safe home?



There might be more information Taseer has about Arif's history, but Falak has her experience with Arif's presence. You cannot outlaw one of the other points of view. So, this drama creates a clash between male confidence, and female perception. What is ethically good about it, however, is that it unfortunately doesn't imply one perception is correct, it simply shows how not seriously considering another person's perception has an impact.

Moral Responsibility and Consequences

There is an added layer of justifiability, with intention and effect being disconnected. Taseer's motive to give Arif a helping hand is good, but his move puts him in a situation that poses a risk to his marriage. What Falak wants to do is reasonable, but it can be harmful to the relationship if she suspects that she's being unfaithful. While Mansha's claims for independence are legitimate, this choice is made in an array of familial relationships. It therefore implies there are aspects of consequence and intention in moral responsibility and that this is the case in this dramatization.

Here's a helpful metaphor to think about the three characters:

Falak: Does not mean that if they are concerned some responses are not justified.

Taseer: If you have a good intention, it doesn't mean that the consequences aren't yours.

A personal autonomy does not mean no relational responsibility – Mansha.

This formulation enables the characters to be read not as moral categories.

Conclusion

Fatima Shahid follows a complex morality when considering the actions of Falak, Mansha and Taseer, such that there is not a simple right or wrong dichotomy. The dramaturgy's main accomplishment is for the audience to come to terms with the fact that human behaviour is motivated by intention, knowledge, circumstance, relationship and consequence. The concept of moral acceptability of Falak stems from her suspicion that she may not get married or put up with the situation at home. However, the legitimacy of her concern does not justify each of her reasonable responses to her concern. It is a moral lesson because Taseer's out and about around Arif is not connected with profit but friendship, generosity and compassion. But his role as a husband calls him to responsibility and to think of the ramifications of his choices when he speaks to Falak. One other form of moral agency is at home, another form of man autonomy that is reconfigured in the context

of familial duties and social responsibilities is Mansha. Hence, these three characters represent the three different ethics—Falak's security, Taseer's fidelity and Mansha's independence. None of these are bad (as individual principles go). Conflict occurs whenever there is an opposition between two moral duties. This adds to the reading of *Jaanum* as a play of moral claims as opposed to a story with clear-cut good vs. evil at stake. It gives the picture how it considers to be morally justifiable in different situations, when it comes to Falak, Mansha and Taseer. Rather, the audience is invited to pay attention to the thoughts of each man and woman and to watch closely to allow their view to come into harmony with his and to understand why their actions appear just to them. The drama is ultimately inspiring and suggesting a balance between trust/doubt, independence/responsibility, generosity/limits, perception/communication in terms of ethical relationships. *Jaanum* depicts these conflicts as household conflicts, which are magnified moral examinations of moral being and the struggle of judgment in the complexity of the human family.

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