

Revisionist Constructions of National Identity: The Popularity of Ertugrul Ghazi in Pakistan

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Abstract

This research project examines the meteoric rise of the tele-series *Dirilis: Ertugrul* (2014), released in Pakistan in 2020. It highlights the factors that have contributed to the success of this series by exploring the role of media, historical narratives, and the necessities of Pakistani nationalism that constantly strives to create an Islamic identity for the country. In this respect, we state that while *Dirilis: Ertugrul* served as a political instrument for the Turkish political party *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, it also stimulated tourism in Turkey and garnered cultural appreciation and interest in Ottoman history as a byproduct. While the show was visually appealing to the Pakistani audience, the study will build upon and expand the argument that Pakistanis have always

looked for an Islamic identity that comes from outside the country. In this context, *Dirilis: Ertugrul* acts as a catalyst for a crisis of identity in Pakistan.

Keywords: Tele-series, *Dirilis: Ertugrul*, Pakistan, Historical narratives, Islamic Identity, Post-colonial states, televised invasion, Cultivation theory

Introduction

Dirilis: Ertugrul is a series about the father of Osman Ghazi, who is the founding father of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1908). This series portrays the life and the struggles of Ertugrul Ghazi. However, it was not the first 'Ottoman invasion' of Pakistani airspace. Turkish series like *Magnificent Century* (aired in Pakistan on May 10, 2013, on Geo Kahani under the name *Mera Sultan*) had already proved themselves commercially successful. *Dirilis Ertugrul* was aired in 2020 on Pakistan's state television, PTV, at the instructions of the then Prime Minister, Imran Khan. It became a source of entertainment and a way to know about real or imagined 'Muslim Heroes' for Pakistani people. The series met unprecedented success with Ertugrul T-shirts, caps, and *biryani* and pan shops named after the show. What explains this phenomenon? This article argues that since an extraterritorial Islamic identity, rooted either in the Middle East or Central Asia, has been collinear with Pakistani nationalism, the success of *Ertugrul* can be explained in terms of Pakistan's quest for an Islamic identity that comes from beyond the Indian subcontinent.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The introduction, influence and success of Turkish content, particularly TV shows focusing on Muslim heroes, will be explored utilising Yasin, Iqbal, Tariq, Fareed and Islam. Citing Yilmaz and Shakil, we will explore and inquire into the claim that Turkish content is both a means of projecting Turkish soft power, and of challenging the position enjoyed by the state of Saudi Arabia in the Sunni Muslim world. In this way, Turkish plays, dubbed an 'Ottoman invasion' of the media space, are seen as historical reconstructions infused with the political agenda of Turkey's ruling party. Furthermore, this study presses into service the 'Cultivation Theory' of George Gerbner (1969), and Roger Silverstone's *Television and Everyday Life* to interpret the influence of the media on attitudes and beliefs. We will utilize visual research methods enunciated by Webb and Bedi to analyse visual media, and argue that Pakistan's quest for postcolonial nationhood compels it to search for cultural affinity with Central Asian/ Arab states. A kind of centrifugal nationalism has defined Pakistan's

postcolonial existence, a trajectory into which Turkish TV shows can be situated to generate new insights.

Research Questions

1. What explains the rise and popularity of Ertugrul Ghazi in Pakistan?
2. How does the construct of national identity interact with the broadcasting of Urdu-dubbed Turkish content in Pakistan?

Situating the Argument:

In recent years, social and electronic media have gained immense influence on viewers. This is an age of technology where everything has become more accessible than it was in the past. In *New Kings of the World*, Fatima Bhutto investigates the success of the Turkish Soap Opera and its global impact. She argues that these television series and songs are cultural exports. This book holds that cultural shifts in the 21st century have allowed Bollywood to promote Indian culture and an idealized life through its songs and movies. Likewise, this book explores the success and popularity of the Turkish Soap Opera. To Pakistanis, these historical plays provide an opportunity to see the glorious past of the Muslims. Bhutto has also stated that these forms of media are the tools of soft power/ diplomacy (Bhutto). Hoodbhoy sees such shows as creating a sense of belonging through the portrayal of values, culture, and lifestyles. Barban has argued that such tele series become popular in postcolonial countries that struggle with creating an indigenous self-imagery. Audiences can be moved (for better or worse) by what they see and listen to on the screen (Silverstone 133). TV shows provide a way for viewers to watch the world through television screens. This makes them believe what they see on television.

Arguably, people get emotionally attached to what they watch on TV screens. Cinema can influence people's opinions on various aspects such as their political preferences (Kubrak). It enhances imagination, shows the world multiple perspectives, and broadens people's vision and thinking (Prasanna). Movies can create images of other countries, which can increase the interest of the audience for them (Kubrak).

Dirilis: Ertugrul presents an ideal Muslim hero. Pakistanis readily took in the portrayal of the glorious Muslim warrior. They related themselves to Muslims shown in the series. Without being too far off the mark, we might state that *Dirilis: Ertugrul* has made Pakistani youth interested in Muslim heroes (Yasin, Iqbal, Tariq, Fareed, Islam). Most people who watched *Dirilis: Ertugrul* found it to be more than a source of entertainment. People took it as an authentic history of Muslims in Central Asia. Simultaneously, the modern state of Turkey delivered a message of Muslim unity (under Turkish leadership) through the series. It presented Turks as true Muslim leaders who are capable of facing any threat from non-Muslims.

Brief History of Turkish TV Shows

Arzu Ozturkmen's article titled 'Turkish Content: The Historical Rise of Dizi Genre' explores the struggle of the Turkish drama industry to make series with high production values and capable of competing with Western productions. Turkish dramas have begun to provide a blend of musical, spatial, cinematographic, and visual forms. These dramas evolved from simple short stories to the present age-long successful series. Turkey started to produce historical series in the 1980s (Ozturkmen). Today, we can see the most advanced form of those series. The competition among the TV channels led to the production of improvised dramas. *Dirilis: Ertugrul* is the result of this competition, which the Turkish state itself sponsored. It was aired on Turkish national television. It would have been impossible to make such a mega project without the government's support. The government realised the potential of teleseries. Consequently, the 2000s became constructive years of the Dizi industry (Ozturkmen). Turkish dramas started to create a global impact on distant territories with state support.

***Ertugrul* in Pakistan**

'Transnational Islamist Populism between Pakistan and Turkey: The Case of *Dirilis: Ertugrul* by Ihsan Yilmaz and Kainat Shakil discusses the launch of *Dirilis: Ertugrul* in Pakistan in the spring of 2020. The purpose behind this launch was to tighten the ties between the two countries (Yilmaz and Shakil). Another factor to consider, as the article shows, is Turkey's regional/global ambitions. Turkey has presented itself as the guardian of the Sunni Muslim world (Yilmaz and Shakil). The rivalry between Turkey and Saudi Arabia is not a recent event. Both countries are trying to protect and project their Islamic identities. Islam in Saudi Arabia is identified with Wahhabism. But Wahhabis are often viewed as an extremist group of Sunni Muslims Islam, whereas Hanafite Turkey is seen as following a moderate version. Turkey poses the greatest challenge for Saudi Arabia due to its geopolitical and economic strength. The glorious Ottoman past of Turkey is resented by some Arab nations, particularly Saudi Arabia (Venetis). The ban on *Dirilis: Ertugrul* in Saudi Arabia shows that Arabs are not comfortable with celebrating the Ottoman past. That partly explains why Saudi Arabia funded a \$40 million counter series called *Malik-e-Nar* (Released on 17 November 2019 and directed by Peter Webber).

'Us' and 'Them'

Dirilis uses the binary of us and them for Turks and non-Muslims. Such binary classifications find some resonance in the Two-Nations' Theory of the Pakistan project which places all non-Muslims in one category. The diversity between non-Muslims in Pakistan, and among Muslims themselves is plastered over using such simple binary divisions.

Binaristic divisions, especially between Muslims and Hindus, are employed liberally in school textbook curricula in Pakistan. Islam is often the first identity of every Pakistani (at least officially), so that school children studying Pakistan Studies are encouraged to

relate themselves to Arabs, Turks, and Afghans. This shows the complex negotiations of identity in Pakistan. Pakistanis must refer to other regions/nations to define themselves. A seminal work in this regard is KK Aziz's *The Murderer of History in Pakistan*. The author has included information from sixty-six books on social studies, Pakistan studies, and history studied in schools and colleges in Pakistan. Aziz argues that the Pakistani history depicted in textbooks is distorted.

A negative image of non-Muslims is sketched through this distorted information. Such 'histories' also claim that non-Muslims have always kept enmity in their hearts despite the fair treatment by Muslims. British rule provided a chance for non-Muslims, especially the Hindus, to collaborate against Muslims. This collaboration led to the downfall of the Muslims, and in this way, the British conquered the whole sub-continent. The misinformation in Pakistani textbooks is the fruit of the tree of historical revisionism (Nazir). The authorities have no intention to upgrade the syllabus of Pakistani textbooks to international standards. In *Dirilis: Ertugrul*, Muslim warriors are busy killing non-Muslims who are presented as tricksters. This one-dimensional portrayal of non-Muslims has garnered the show some criticism in the West.

Pakistan has had to search for an identity after its independence. Pakistanis wanted to become a nation just like other nations in the world. They had an enemy (India) next door with whom they had a shared history for hundreds of years. India has always claimed that it has more Muslims than Pakistan. So, the Pakistanis started their struggle to create their own national identity (Mallet). Muslims of the subcontinent attempted to define and distinguish themselves in religious terms. Pakistan is one of the two cases of religious nationalism in modern times; the second is Israel (Shaikh). Religious populism has become a part of Pakistan's cultural imagination and identity due to its use by both civil and military governments. Politicians and dictators have used Islam as a political tool to get the support of people. This has resulted in a Muslim nationalism in the minds of people.

Owing to religious affinity, Pakistan developed a centrifugal nationalism that looked to the Middle East. Pakistan preferred to become a fragment of the Middle East rather than be a part of the subcontinent (Faheem, Xingang, Wasim, Hussain). Pakistan's quest for a religious identity based 'outside' complicates the consolidation of a stable postcolonial identity.

Pakistan is a country with multiple religions and diverse cultures. However, when asked what Pakistan means, most of the time, people put forth the claim that it means 'La Ilaha Illa Allah (Yilmaz and Saleem)'. This was a popular political slogan used to mobilise public opinion in favour of the Pakistan Movement in the 1940s. Highly emotive, and successful in garnering support from north India's Muslim constituency in the 1946 elections, the slogan seems to equate the state of Pakistan

with Islam. In other words, Pakistan comes into being not simply as a country for South Asian Muslims, but has a deeper, more significant role to play in the history of Islam. This gives the Pakistan idea a transnational ambition and pan-Islamic accoutrements. In other words, Pakistan goes beyond the geographic boundaries of Pakistan, and Pakistanis are connected to Muslims from Central Asia and the Middle East. Pakistanis thus watched *Dirilis: Ertugrul* with great zeal and enthusiasm due to its Islamic trappings and portrayal of a glorious Muslim past. Pakistani viewers considered the Turkish past as their own. These factors played a role in the popularity of *Dirilis: Ertugrul* in Pakistan.

Global Appeal and Soft Power

Turkish dramas have successfully created a global impact. In 'Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere', Marwan M. Kraidy and Omer Al-Ghazzi take up the dominance of Turkish dramas in the Arab world. Turkish plays have high production values and stylized sets. People are impressed by the outstanding visuals. The TV series *Kurtlar Vadisi*, a socio-political drama, used expensive interior designing and stunning visuals to deliver its 'anti-imperial' message targeting the US and Israel. Thus Turkish writers and directors exploit anti-Americanism to their advantage.

The other reason for the popularity of Turkish dramas among Arab people is the portrayal of modern and fashionable characters. Women are openly attracted to the male characters (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi). In other words, the characters in these plays are relatively free of the social confines and repression found in Arab societies. Yet, at the same time, an overall Muslim identity creates a bridge between Turkish productions and Arabic viewers. We can also find this similarity in the case of Pakistan. Turkey is a more metropolitan and tolerant society than Pakistan, but still Muslim or Islamic. Turkish shows are bolder in their portrayal of human emotions/relationships. Such relationships could not have been shown in Pakistani soap operas. Thus Turkish content also provides a vicarious exploration of the complexities of human emotions to Pakistani viewers.

The Turkish government has been using the media as a political tool. The television series which are aired on TRT are suffused with government agendas. The Turkish government is taking advantage of shared Muslim culture with other nations. *Dirilis: Ertugrul* is a state-sponsored project attempting to relate Ertugrul with Erdoğan (Cevik).

Dirilis: Ertugrul is thus not just a source of entertainment for its viewers. It has had a visceral impact on Pakistanis. Pakistanis started to praise another nation, Turkey, based on a television series. This was the hidden political motive of Turkey to generate global influence. *Dirilis: Ertugrul* served as a means of cultural promotion.

Pakistan's Quest for Identity

Post-colonial nations face many difficulties in creating identities after they have attained formal independence from European empires. Often, these states struggle

with the legacies of Empire. Franz Fanon argued about the consequences of colonialism and the change formed by the experience of immigration. For Edward Said, the central point of identity construction is the ability to resist and to recreate oneself as a post-colonial, anti-imperialist subject (Koolwal and Iqbal I).

Often postcolonial nations depend economically on the former colonial states. British rule has played a pivotal role in the identity crisis of Pakistan. British rule lasted (formally) from 1857 to 1947 over the subcontinent. The cultural freight of colonial rule is still present in formally decolonised nations. Carrying a chip on their shoulders from colonial times, faced by economic challenges today, having poor standards of education and healthcare, and diminishing global presence, Pakistanis often look to Central Asia or the Middle East for a consolatory romance with a glorious past. (Foreign) Muslim nations like Turkey, and Arab countries can become ideals to emulate or look up to so as to dispel the inferiority that is associated with colonial subjugation to European powers in the 18th and 19th centuries, and contemporary irrelevance. Often Pakistanis do not introduce themselves as native Muslims of South Asia, as this would signal their status as converts to Islam in the recent past. The recourse is to claim Arab/ Afghan/ Central Asian heritage. Many a Pakistani will therefore claim to be Arab to prove their pure Islamic origin (Hali). This sometimes leads them to adopt some traditions and cultures of other countries.

In an atmosphere where the Arabian peninsula and Turkic lands are imagined as places of origin, TV shows like *Dirilis: Ertugrul* understandably attract huge followings in Pakistan. Furthermore, Pakistanis were exposed to this series during the times of the COVID-19 lockdown (Yalmaz & Shakil). People were suffering from lack of entertainment opportunities. They started to watch this series as a way to entertain themselves, but the series tapped into deeper existential needs of a population that is still searching for its identity. Pakistanis started to appreciate the glamorous history of the Ottoman Empire. This translated into greater reception and celebration of Turkish culture, and more people-to-people contacts between Pakistanis and Turks (Yilmaz & Shakil). Tourists from Pakistan started to explore the tombs of the heroes shown in the Television series. This generated a rapid increase in tourism in Turkey right after the Pandemic.

The Ertugrul Sensation

The success of *Dirilis: Ertugrul* can be ascribed to the urge of Pakistanis to relate with the Ottoman past. The relationship between the Muslims of the sub-continent and Turkey is also historical. Muslims of the sub-continent showed great reverence to the Ottoman Caliph as long as the office existed. *Dirilis: Ertugrul* revived this vestigial respect for the defunct Ottoman Empire.

The Urdu-dubbed version of *Dirilis: Ertugrul* paved the way to promote Turkish culture and nationalism in Pakistan. *Dirilis: Ertugrul* formed an image of

Islamic heroes that belonged to the Turkish region. Pakistanis started to relate their Muslim identity with the Turks. Furthermore, *Dirilis: Ertugrul* played a political role by glamorising Turkish history. It can rightly be called a televised Ottoman Invasion. The series can also be seen as part of Turkey's ambitious diplomacy on a global scale to assume leadership of the Sunni world (Cevik). The continuation of the series in the form of spin off projects like *Kurulus Osman* is a case in point.

Several factors have contributed to the success of *Dirilis: Ertugrul* in Pakistan. *Dirilis: Ertugrul* provided an escape to Pakistanis, especially during the pandemic, but also in broader terms, the show became a way of distraction from everyday routine. Since it was based on putative historical material, it was more appealing to audiences. Commentators have noted that every person in Pakistan had their favourite character in the show (Amjad).

Another factor in the success of the show was strong diplomatic relations that exist between Turkey and Pakistan. The two states have historically enjoyed cordial relations, despite Pakistan being closer to Turkey's chief rival in the Muslim world: Saudi Arabia. But denominationally, Pakistan is closer to the Hanafite Turks than the Salafi/ Wahhabi Saudis. Pakistanis have also invested in Turkish business, and a good number of Pakistanis visit Turkey for tourist purposes. Audiences were thus watching a 'brotherly' country's television show. Moreover, the show portrayed a (fictional) past to which Pakistanis also lay claim.

Furthermore, the show was made accessible to every Pakistani through its Urdu dubbing. It broke the language barrier, which played a great role in the success of this show in Pakistan. It thus attracted a wider range of audience (Brehmer).

Urdu dubbing of the Turkish series is not a recent phenomenon. Turkish shows have been dubbed in Urdu for several years. This process of Urdu dubbing started in the early 2000s. Television shows like *Gümüş* (Directed by İrfan Şahin on 20 January 2005), released in Pakistan under the name *Noor* and *Menekşe ile Halil* (Directed by Uluç Bayraktar on 7 September 2007), released in Pakistan under the name, *Manahil Aur Khalil*, were among the first Turkish dramas that were dubbed in Urdu. These dramas were launched but could not gain much popularity. Turkish dramas started to gain popularity after the success of *Aşk-ı Memnu* (Directed by Hilal Saral on 4 September 2008), released in Pakistan under the name *Ishq-e-Mamnoon*. It was launched in 2012 and gained a vast viewership. This success was continued by the addition of other series like *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (Directed by Yagmur Taylan, Durul Taylan, Mert Baykal, and Yağız Alp Akaydın on 5 January 2011), released in Pakistan under the name *Mera Sultan* and *Fatmagül un Suçu Ne?* (Directed by Hilal Saral on 16 September 2010).

Dirilis: Ertugrul was praised and appreciated even by politicians in Pakistan. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan talked about the show while discussing the influence of the media on the youth. He stated that the media caused several adverse effects on the youth due to explicit content. Moreover, Western content has influenced

Muslim values and identity. He advised people to watch *Dirilis: Ertugrul* to learn about the Islamic past. Although the show was mostly based on fictional events and characters, Imran Khan saw it as a means to initiate people in Islamic history. For Khan and the show's producers, historical accuracy took a back seat. Mehmet Bozdog, the man who wrote and produced the series, was reported as saying: "There is very little information about the period we are presenting — not exceeding 4-5 pages. Even the names are different in every source. The first works written about the establishment of the Ottoman State were about 100-150 years later. There is no certainty in this historical data... we are shaping a story by dreaming" (Hoodbhoy). In other words, the show was based entirely on the fertile imagination of the writers. But people like Imran Khan, and many others in Pakistan, took the events as having occurred in the Islamic past.

Conclusion

The rise and popularity of the Turkish tele-series *Dirilis: Ertugrul* in Pakistan can be attributed to a combination of factors. The role of media, historical narratives, and the quest for an Islamic identity in Pakistan all played significant roles in the show's success.

This study utilised cultivation theory and visual research methods to analyse the influence of media on attitudes and beliefs. It found that *Dirilis: Ertugrul* served as a political instrument for the Turkish political party Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, while also stimulating tourism in Turkey and fostering cultural appreciation for Ottoman history.

The show's appeal to the Pakistani audience was a result of its visually appealing production, action sequences, and high-quality storytelling. Strong diplomatic relations between Turkey and Pakistan, Turkish business investments, and tourism also contributed to the show's success, and were simultaneously spawned by it.

Furthermore, the show tapped into Pakistan's search for an Islamic identity external to the Indian subcontinent. Pakistanis have historically looked to Central Asia or the Middle East for a consolatory connection to a glorious past. *Dirilis: Ertugrul* provided a vicarious exploration of human emotions and complexities, resonating with Pakistani viewers and sparking interest in Muslim heroes among the youth.

In terms of national identity, Pakistan has faced difficulties in forging its own identity after independence. The distorted portrayal of non-Muslims and Pakistani history in textbooks limits the feeling of belonging for minorities. By looking to regions and nations outside the country, Pakistan has struggled to define itself. However, through the depiction of an ideal Muslim hero in *Dirilis: Ertugrul*, the show contributes to the promotion of Pakistani nationalism and the quest for an Islamic identity.

Overall, *Dirilis: Ertugrul* in Pakistan serves as a reflection of the complex dynamics and aspirations of a post-colonial nation in search of its identity. It provides an avenue for escapism, entertainment, and a sense of connection to a glorious past. By delving into the factors that contributed to its success, this research sheds light on the profound impact of media and historical narratives on societal attitudes and belief systems.

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