Finding A Voice: Literacy Use Among Siraiki Women

Shirin Zubair

Abstract

This paper looks at the uses and conceptions of literacy among women from a rural Siraiki community in Pakistan. Literacy is a heavily gendered phenomenon in this community as women's access to literacy was traditionally limited to Arabic literacy. However, a gradual change is evident in women's uses of various literacies in Arabic, Urdu and English. The paper particularly draws attention to uses of literacy for self-expression among younger women such as writing diaries and reading women's magazines; excerpts from women's interviews and diaries are quoted to argue that contrary to popular perceptions, these uses of literacies are significant in that they reflect women's subjugated position in the social set-up and a desire to find a voice through literacy. It has been argued that the uses of literacy are very closely associated not only to women's social roles but also to their inner feelings and emotions: the uses of literacy described in this paper suggest that these literacy practices are reflective of a search for a new identity.

Introduction

Research on women's literacy use, reading of romance and women's magazines, television viewing has largely focused on western women (Ang 1985, Radway 1987, Hermes 1995, Horsman 1987, Finders 1997, Morley 1986, Mace 1998, Rockhill 1993, Stacey 1994). This paper describes the role of multiple literacies in the lives of women from a non-western community. The analysis of excerpts from women's speech (focus groups, interviews) and writing (diaries) shows that these women's engagements with literacy are far from meaningless or trivial. Focusing on how women use literacy skills to make sense of their lives and worlds, this paper strives to illustrate that contrary to the appalling literacy rates shown by international aid agencies, literacy is integral to their social as well as personal lives. It is suggested that younger women's uses of literacies in English and Urdu facilitate their search for a new identity as opposed to the traditional gender roles. These literacy practices are not only reflective of women's social and communal roles, they are also a means of resistance to and transcendence from the dominant traditional gender ideologies. Finders' work (1996, 1997) on the 'underlife' and the 'hidden literacies' of junior high school girls' literacy practices has illustrated how social roles are shaped and maintained through reading of ' teen 'zeens', and how the note-writing composes an underlife beneath the school-sanctioned literacy

practices. Finders' work shows how people tend to resist an official view of who they must be and what they must do. She went on to argue that more studies are needed that examine the ' offstage regions', with consideration of how ' hidden transcripts' might disrupt the public.

Ethnographic Data

Data for this paper comes from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in various phases during June 1996-March 1998, in two adjoining villages in the Siraiki-speaking area of Southern Punjab, Pakistan. The present ethnographic study fills a gap in the existing literature on women's literacy use, focusing on the lived experiences of thirty-five women. The research on women's literacy use has looked at western and African contexts, overlooking the gendered nature of literacy in Asian contexts. The use of ethnographic methods in this study was inspired by the work of contemporary anthropologists, social linguists and literacy researchers like Heath (1983), Baynham (1994), Barton and Hamilton (1998), and Street (1995) who argue that in order to capture the diversity and complexity of various literacies in such under-developed communities, one needs to take account of the ideological issues and social practices that surround people's literacy practices. Methodologically, Spivak (1988) has problematised the necessity of speaking for people who have no voices, thus empowering the research subjects. One way of achieving this goal is to let the methods be open-ended or dialogic (Cameron et al. 1992). Participant observation, case studies and focus groups have been used in an attempt to achieve these objectives, thus endeavouring to empower the subjects by giving them a voice. The problem of finding a voice for themselves emerged as one of the main issues when the older women used the metaphors *silent birds* and *caged birds* to describe their lives and literacies. The data consist of six focus group recordings, thirty five interviews, field notes, literacy documents and participant observation in literacy events.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing upon Street's ideological model (1984), this paper looks at literacy practices as part of broader gender roles and identities of women in a patriarchal, agrarian community. In doing so, the paper attempts to understand women's changing identities in relation to various literacies and within the socio-cultural context of their families, homes and the wider community. The ideological model of literacy proposed by Street (1984) stresses the significance of the socialisation process in the construction of the meaning of literacy for participants, and is therefore concerned with the general social institutions through which this process takes place and not just the specific educational ones. It distinguishes claims for the consequences of literacy from its real significance for social groups. The investigation of literacy practices from this perspective necessarily entails an ethnographic approach, which provides closely detailed accounts of the whole cultural context in which those practices have meaning. Street (1998) argues that research indicates literacy practices to be developing and spreading in more complex ways, whilst the over-simplified government discourses

reductively focus on falling standards and lack of literacy skills. He suggests that a possible bridge is the new approach, which views language and literacy as social practices and resources rather than a set of rules formally and narrowly defined.

Gender and Identity

A notion closely linked to language and literacy in people's individual and communal lives is that of gender and identity construction. In comparison to a mono-literacy situation, a bi/multiliteracy situation readily identifies the categories such as 'identity' and 'ideology' (Baynham 1995) which are essential to the theoretical goal that sets out to look at a literacy situation in terms of variety of 'literacies' within an 'ideological model' (Street 1984) or different worlds of literacy. Although anthropologists do not agree on the issues of universality and variation in gender roles, feminists, poststructuralists and literacy researchers believe that whereas sex is biologically determined, gender is socially constructed within each society (Millet 1977, Stacey and Price 1981, Dubisch 1986, Weedon 1987). This has to do with male and female roles constructed within each society, and can give rise to different forms of literacy needs in fulfiling a gender role and also in overcoming the stereotypes attached to these roles (Cornes 1994). The role-related aspects of literacy use in the community under study have been illustrated in Zubair (1999a), with instances of women reading the electricity bills, and writing records, and men paying the bills and doing the household shopping.

Like all other patriarchal societies, this community is also dominated by male values; the role models for women are defined by men (Hall 1990). The concept of 'cultural identity' according to Hall (1989) includes both -a collective 'one true self', in terms of a shared culture/history and critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'! Education is one of the most significant means of women's' entry into the public sphere. 'Identity empowerment' occurs when women move from domestic to public domain (Hall 1990).

Literacy and Social Class

The community is broadly divided into two classes i.e. the landowning and the landless class. Women from the landowning class strictly observe *purdah*, which restricts their mobility, thus perpetuating illiteracy and lack of awareness of their rights. This strict adherence to *purdah* leads to the exclusion of women from the public domain. However, some change is evident as more and more women from the younger generation are gaining access to literacy in Urdu and English in addition to the traditional Arabic. The notion of identity is inextricably tied to multi-literacies: gaining access to a code goes hand in hand with an individual's personal and social roles, as identities are partly constructed and forged through language(s). Thus gaining access to English literacy goes hand in hand with younger women's new concept of their identity-and they negotiate this change through their everyday (literacy) practices and through their talk and behaviour. This is illustrated with examples from the data in the following parts of the paper.

The upper class women's access to literacy is not hindered by lack of resources but due to the traditional, archetypal role-models portrayed in religious teachings, text-books, popular culture and media, all of which emphasise that women must be confined to the domestic domain. These conditions are favourable to men who view female literacy and education as a passport to economic as well as social autonomy and independence, and therefore a threat to their power and control over them. The lower class women have even less opportunities of learning literacy because their problems are compounded due to the lack of financial and economic resources and constraints.

The traditional values and role expectations are inculcated by mothers into their daughters; as young girls they internalise them and uphold the same values. Only when they are exposed to the outside world through literacy and higher education, may they realise inconsistencies in these values. The landowner class women who have had access to college education and the western world via the satellite channels, films, magazines and television programmes recognise these contradictions and inconsistencies in male values and beliefs. An interesting pattern found in the data is that whereas landowner class have easy access to dish channels, foreign films and the media, the landless class girls are not allowed by their men (brothers, fathers) to watch dish channels or Indian or English movies on video. They are only allowed to watch local television. Some fathers do not allow their daughters to watch television at all. They only allow them to watch news on television, which may not interest them. For example, 20 year old Hajira was not allowed to watch movies or music programmes on the television. She could only watch some teleplays and news. Her father insisted that she watch news, whereas she was more interested in other things.

I wanted to go to school but my father was not in favour...I still want to learn more but he says Islam does not allow girls to pursue education (Hajira 26/12/98)

The women from the landless class may not be restricted in terms of physical mobility within their respective villages like their landowning counterparts, but are constrained by time. The women from this class work hard in and outside of their homes and find it difficult to allocate time to reading and writing activities. Young teenage girls who go to school have to work at home, help their mothers with domestic chores before they get time to finish their schoolwork. During the harvest season, these girls' access to schools and literacy is further curtailed by their family's demand, motivated by financial requirements, that they work in the fields with them.

Women's literacy practices

Baynham (1995) defines literacy practice as 'a concrete human activity', involving not just the objective facts of what people do with literacy, but also what they associate with what they do, how they construct its value, and the ideologies that surround it. The concept of practice is linked to subjective elements in literacy practices. It involves the attitudes of people-what people think about what they do. It also involves the concept of values (Barton 1994, Barton and Padmore 1991); it focuses on the subjectivity

and agency dimension of practice. In the remainder of the paper, follows an analysis of the patterns that cut across literacy practices of diary writing and reading of newspapers and magazines.

Reading of newspapers and women's magazines

Some interesting gendered patterns related to newspaper reading are:

a) the allocation of time and place
b) choice of the paper
c) choice of reading sections

Women read the newspapers at different times during the day, often during leisure time. The time women can allocate to read papers and magazines also relates to the division of labour. Women read the paper in their leisure time, while it is an important daytime activity for men. The choice of the paper also reflects a gendered preference. Women's leanings seemed to be towards left-wing papers like *Pakistan*, and *Jang*; these papers are trendy and glamorous in that they give a lot of coverage to fashion, gossip and celebrities, and coloured pictures, especially in their weekly editions. Not surprisingly, in these papers and magazines, women tend to read more fiction than facts. The choice of particular sections read by women are also related to their prescribed social and familial roles. For example, a young woman elaborates her preference for women's magazines:

I am more interested in women's magazines and in what they eat, drink, wear and do. I find men very boring- there's no charm in their lives-I don't like my brother's attitude- they want crisp, clean clothes to wear, ready-made food- they do nothing positive in their day- women and girls are far more interesting. We talk about issues and topics (Huma 31/12/96)

Some said they only read the headlines while others said they only read some particular columns e.g. religious column in the paper. A pattern found in the data is that whereas the middle aged group and young girls read various types of articles and world-news in the newspapers, the religious columns and the headlines are read mostly by older group of women. Some of the younger women read news from across the world to remain well informed about the current happenings internationally. Some said they specially read news about the events and happenings in the lives of their favourite celebrities, like actors, sportsmen or politicians. Lady Diana, Benazir Bhutto and Imran Khan are a few names news of whose personal lives are read with interest by younger women. However, it is worthwhile to note that women have to choose times and spaces for reading and writing between heavily gendered home activities. Some women reported reading the newspaper at bedtime as they do not get free time to read it during the day.

Discussing literacy time and family time for working class mothers in England, Mace (1998) uses the word play while elaborating on the meanings of literacy in mother's lives. She argues that certain kinds of literacy behaviour simply looked like *play* in conflict with the work of mothering. Like many other leisure activities, Mace (1998)

found that literacy for mothers is something saved for the time before and/or after the years of childbearing and mothering. Similarly (and to an even greater degree), most married women in this Siraiki community seemed to find no time to devote to such leisure activities as reading and writing. The younger and middle-aged group women are generally more interested in romantic fiction and women's magazines. Writing about the practices of reading women's magazines, Hermes (1995) observes that everyday practices far from being meaningless are highly significant in that they can be a form of resistance to the mainstream cultural practices. It can be argued that the young women's reading of romantic fiction and writing of personal diaries is significant in two respects: firstly as self- expression because women are denied a public voice, and secondly as a denial of and resistance to the dominant male culture.

Writing about time and literacy, Mace (1998) interpreted mother's writing time as a means of transcending temporal realities through literacy, as 'the mother who works at home is the family timekeeper' (1998: 18), and cannot afford the luxury of 'literacy and its pleasures'. Thus this act of reading functions as a way of transcending the mundane through their literacy skills and practices and envisaging an alternative albeit imaginative culture of their own. As for Radway's readers (1984) reading of romances was a declaration of independence: a kind of minor rebellion against the position accorded by the dominant patriarchal discourse, that of the caring housewife and mother. A similar interpretation might be given to these women's reading and writing practices, who, try to resist the dominant cultural practices by creating a world of their own and an alternative set of values as opposed to the male culture through romance reading and finding a voice through creative writing.

Diary Writing

Diary writing and diary keeping is a very prominent literacy use in the community. It exists across genders but there are differences in terms of its use, frequency and maintenance. Reading woman's magazines and writing personal diaries emerge as two very distinct literacy practices that the young women engage themselves in very regularly. It was found to be common and very popular among younger, especially unmarried women. Almost all young and middle age women who were interviewed had kept personal diaries at some point in their lives. Some daily write diaries. These diaries consist of pages of personal feelings, intimate thoughts, and self-reflection. Some women also write quotable quotes which they call *the golden words* i.e. the words of wisdom from religion, philosophy and famous scholars of the East and West.

Some women in their mid-thirties wrote diaries before their marriages, but said that they have stopped writing them after marriage but have kept their old diaries as memoirs. Some women who write a diary do not let anyone else read or even have a peep into their personal diaries. The diaries are their private possessions and they are personal and somewhat sacred. Something very deep and subjective was discovered in their diary writing as some of them had composed their own verses, poems and short stories and had preserved the diaries for a long time. As Mace (1998) has argued,

literacy engages our imaginations, intellects, emotions and memories, and is a matter of enormous mystery. These literacy practices are tied in to the availability of time and space in their lives, and simultaneously they serve as a means of temporal excursions from the mundane into the realms of the imagination. These diaries are strictly personal only to be read by the writer, but some women did volunteer to offer a few pages from their diaries to be used as documents in this research. These diary pages are intimate, uncensored expression of feelings and contain details about their day-to-day experiences.

While looking at the emotive aspects of literacy in Nukulaelae letters, Besnier (1995) argues that it is commonly assumed that spoken language is universally more *involved, emotional* and better suited for the representation of emotions than written language. He argues that these claims are supported with data from mainstream western contexts where writing is viewed as being less ' subjective', less 'emotional'. However, Besnier's research and the present data suggest otherwise. In the following paragraphs, excerpts from the personal diaries of young women show how literacy is linked to our deepest feelings and emotions.

Example 1

After dinner I took my radio and went upstairs on the terrace. I liked a drama which was on air. It was about an educated daughter-in-law who is a doctor. She wants to work but her husband and mother-in-law do not approve. They want her to remain domesticated. She feels suffocated. At last, she leaves her husband and takes up work. She earns her own living, has her own house and car. I thought strange thoughts after listening to this play, whether she made a right decision or not. I kept thinking until I dozed off. (Documents from fieldwork Dec97-Mar98).

This extract provides evidence of the younger women's use of writing skills as an expression of the self and the conflicting ideologies regarding women's space and role in the community. The young woman's preoccupation with the issues of female education and employment, self-realisation through work rather than marriage, challenging and renegotiating the existing stereotypes regarding personal and social identity, are well illustrated through this quotation from her personal diary. However, it is pertinent to note that this critical awareness of literacy -the use of literacy skills not only to read and write the word but also to read the world (Freire 1988)- was witnessed only among younger women. Although the older women described themselves as *caged* and *silent birds* in focus groups, unlike their younger counterparts they did not raise these questions. As these younger women become exposed to the western and local media, they are in the process of examining their own lives in relation to the new images of women portrayed through the media-culture. They are gradually learning how to create and take up new opportunities and move into what had always been viewed as 'male jobs' or 'male spaces'. This is reflected in their literacy practices as well as in their public discourse.

The pages of their personal diaries contain a mixture of personal and sociological insights–the quotations, short stories, poems, personal observations–all point to the fact that these women are not merely functionally literate but are able to understand and interpret the world from their own standpoint. They demonstrate the capability, as in the example quoted above from a personal diary, of critically analysing social expectations of women's roles. The problems and issues relating to the traditional roles and the conflict of resolving the personal aspirations with the expectations of their families and the larger community are often the focal points of their writings. The tussle between the contested and conflicting ideologies was also found in their interactions in focus groups (Zubair 1999b).

Example 2

Comparing myself with the village girls, I feel I am much better in lot of ways compared to them. I thank God for that. I observed little knowledge is dangerous. Well! to some extent this applies to me as well BUT I try to improve my knowledge by reading and watching television...

They were mixing Islam with their own old stupid traditions e.g. purdah system, for them wearing a burka was purdah whereas wearing a chaddar was not. I think they have complicated their lives themselves. If they would have changed their trends and mentality their lives would have been much more easier. If people of cities can digest certain things they belonged to the same country they would have digested it as well. Yes!!The point is the same lack of education and lack of facilities, which is really a pity because village people are missing too much and suffering too much. (Documents Dec 97-Mar98).

Here too the young woman seems to be questioning the dominant cultural practices by arguing for reading and watching television not only as leisure activities but to help her improve herself, improve *her knowledge*, presumably improve her knowledge of the world. This desire for self-improvement through both print and visual literacy is evident among younger women in my data. Whereas men use diary writing as a way of organising their records, a timetable, women use this literacy event for their emotional catharsis and self-exploration.

The use of literacy skills for personal satisfaction and for creative expression of the self is mostly done by young women. Watching television programmes and listening to the radio in the late afternoons and evenings, after finishing the housework is the most popular leisure activity among women. Younger women who are literate in English may watch American soaps like *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

Example 3

On television I watch a lot of other programmes as well...such as 'The Bold and the Beautiful', songs either Urdu or English depends whether its a good song or bad. I feel television is a good media for spreading awareness among lot of people. The

village people learn a lot by television. I know some people of the village say that it's not good to have television, still when there is a certain type of striking news even the ones who are not interested in television believe in that certain type of news and do listen to those people who watch television. What I observed was that in villages some people don't think what they do they just follow some stupid people or the old traditions. Unconsciously they are depending on television, radio and newspaper etc. but they don't realise that and keep on saying or believing stupid things.

Morley's research (1986) on television viewing among families shows that men prefer factual programmes whereas women prefer fictional programmes especially soap operas. Ang's (1985) research on watching *Dallas* also shows that it is particularly popular among women. While *Dallas* and other soap operas present stereotyped and role-conforming images of women, they also give scope to their viewers to construct their own meanings of the same images. This might imply that women watch fictional programmes for personal fulfilment; thus the significance they attach to personal relationships is realized through the vicarious pleasure they derive from television viewing as well as romance reading. Radway's (1987) readers describe romance reading as a special gift. It is seen as time reclaimed from the demands of family and domestic duties that they otherwise perform willingly. Thus she suggests that romance reading is a relaxing release from the tension produced by daily problems and responsibilities, it creates a time or a space within which a woman can be entirely on her own, preoccupied with her personal needs, desires and pleasure. Hence it seems logical to conclude that these women engage in romance reading and watching soaps on television because the experience offers them a welcome break from their mundane, day-to-day existence. Stacey's (1994) study of the relationship between Hollywood female film stars and British female spectators also shows that the act of going to a cinema and watching a Hollywood film was a method of escapism for women since female Hollywood stars not only offered role models of sexual attractiveness but also a source of fantasy of a more powerful and confident self. Moreover, her study revealed that American femininity was seen at the same time as transgressing British femininity. Therefore, the consumption of commodities by women audience, resulting from watching the films, was not merely an act of conformity to the stereotypical image of females as desirable objects but also a way to rebel against restrictive British norms. This may partly explain the popularity of American soap operas such as *The Bold and The Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara* in a country like Pakistan (in general and among younger women in this sample in particular) where American stereotypical images of femininity are received by women as liberating rather than restrictive. For instance the cover of the weekly magazine *Akhbar-e-Jehan,* published by *Jung* publications which was found to be the most popular women's magazine in the village, usually carries a glamorous picture of a female celebrity. For the younger women it epitomises a new and modern image of femaleness, in that the women shown in the picture are usually famous, attractive and powerful. They are famous models or actresses who unlike these women are independent, work in the public domain, and command respect for their work. Hence for younger women who are themselves confined to their homes and restricted in their mobility, such images in

women's magazines are liberating and new rather than restrictive or traditional. According to Radway (1987: 215), romance reading creates a fantasy world and a utopian state for women who read romantic fiction time after time not out of contentment but out of longing and dissatisfaction and as an escape from and protest against their traditional roles. Like Radway's study, Morley's, Ang's and Stacey's studies also show that women prefer fiction because it enables them to escape.

Generational differences among women

Table 1. Women and literacies

Age	Language	Reading	Writing
50-70	Arabic	Quran	
		Prayers	
		Teaching	
	Urdu	Teaching	
		Newspaper	
		TV announcements	
		Calenders	
30-49	Arabic	Quran	
		Prayers	
		Teaching	
	Urdu	Newspaper	Letters
		Magazines	Diaries
		Calenders	Record-keeping
		Cards/ letters	Signing legal papers
		Teaching	
15-29	Arabic	Quran	
		Prayers	
		Teaching	
	Urdu/ English	Magazines	Letters
		Novels	Diaries
		Newspapers	Record-keeping
		Medicine labels	Messages/notes
		Cards/ letters	Exam answers
		Teaching	Signing legal papers
		Studying	Cheques
		Calenders	Poetry/ short story
		TV announcements	

Age seems to play an important part in determining who reads/writes what in which language. Older women in their forties, fifties and sixties perform their ritual prayers regularly five times daily. They also recite the Koran daily. Some recite it and

then read the translation in Urdu. These religious rituals are performed daily at the same set times by these women. The reading of the Koran takes place after early morning prayers in the mornings. This has a deep religious and spiritual significance, i.e. that these women's first and foremost perception of their own identity is that of muslims. Thus they engage in this religious literacy event every morning. All these religious literacy events are carried out in Arabic and Urdu, the only languages that these older women can read. Another significant pattern in the literacy practices of the older women is that they only read the Koran and the local newspapers, sometimes at night, before going to bed. During the day, they engage in household activities of cooking, cleaning etc. Because they primarily see their social role as housewives and mothers, they only read the paper at bedtime, as a leisure activity because they do not find time to read it during the day. Another common feature in the literacy histories of the older women is that since most of them have not been to schools, some have learnt to read only, whereas some could write earlier but have lost the skill due to the lack of practice or the lack of need to write. These women also engage in literacy events which involve negotiation of literacy skills and abilities, for instance some of these women while confined to their homes, utilise their leisure time and teach the poor village children to read Arabic and Urdu, free of charge.

Younger women in their thirties are mostly married and they also engage in similar literacy activities. These include reading the Koran, offering prayers, looking after their homes and children, but they also buy young women's magazines and read them in their leisure time. They mostly read fiction and true stories, nothing that might be traditionally considered heavy or serious. The reasons Hermes' readers (1995) gave for reading women's magazines was that they could be 'easily put down'. Hermes emphasises the double meaning of the phrase in that while women use the phrase to refer to an activity which does not require concentration and can be done simultaneously with other household work, the reading of women's magazines is not regarded as serious reading at all by the high brow. In fact, it is considered lowbrow.

These women read glossy fashion magazines, read true stories, romantic fiction, cooking recipes etc. during their leisure hours in between domestic responsibilities. Most of these women used to write personal diaries before they were married but do not find time to do so after their marriages. Nevertheless, they have kept their old diaries. For reading the women's magazines they do not have to set aside time. They can flick through these magazines simultaneously with other housework without applying their full attention. For diary writing, however, they have to allocate specific time and place as this is a very personal activity and women need some personal space for writing their diaries. After marriage, most of the women from this age group seemed to have lost some of their personal time and space. Therefore they do not write in their diaries any more, but the fact that they have preserved their old diaries suggests that diary writing is not an 'easily put downable' activity- either literally or metaphorically, from their point of view. The preservation of their old diaries might be said to reflect a desire to retain their personal identity as individuals or to create another self as opposed to their identity as someone's daughter or wife in the community. The creation and

preservation of an 'imaginative other self' through diary writing, again, could be a reflection of their dissatisfaction with the dominant system. The denial of a public voice thus seems to have led to a denial of a personal voice too for these married women, who tend to lose whatever little room or space they had created for themselves in their youth. Zubair (1999b) has analysed the use of metaphors *caged birds* and *silent birds* by older women in focus groups. While recounting their literacy histories, some of the older women's comments on their early lives and literacy experiences were highly significant. For instance *we are like caged birds* (older women's focus group 23/12/96)
And:
we remained indoors like silent birds-now there's freedom children are also being educated (older women's focus group 23/12/96)

In this context speech stands for literacy and the ability to articulate themselves and thus achieve self-realisation. Silence being the antonym of speech stands for illiteracy or lack of literate abilities to enable people to participate and function fully in society.

Lakoff (1995) observes that silence is analogous to invisibility. She quotes the example of fundamentalist muslim societies (similar to the one under study), where women must be veiled in public, which she considers a symbolic public invisibility because even in veil women are perceptible objects on streets. She goes on to argue that interpretive control i.e. making of meaning of the private and public discourses is controlled by men even in the western societies. Interpretive control is hard to recognise because it is done silently by those having cultural hegemony. Similarly, Kramsch (1998) has pointed out that cultures resonate with the voices of the powerful, and are filled with the silences of the powerless. Only the powerful decide whose values and beliefs will be deemed worth adopting by the group, and whose voices will be heard.

There are clear hints of dissatisfaction with the dominant system in images and metaphors like *domesticated*, *caged birds* and *silent birds.* Thus the use of metaphors like *silent birds* and *caged bird* reflects an enforced silence. Kaplan (1990: 312) observes:

> A very high proportion of women's poems are about the right to speak and write... that larger subject, the exploration and definition of gender difference in culture, it becomes a distinct issue when women speak or write, and men protest, not only or primarily at what they say, but at the act itself.

Talking about a painting of a woman, 'Silence', by Redon, she argues that it is a social silence as part of the constitution of female identity. Women speak on sufferance in patriarchal societies: the culture prefers them to be silent and yet they must have the faculty of speech to be recognised as human. Silence being the antonym of speech which is synonymous with literacy. Freire (1972) observes that learning to read and write ought to be an opportunity to know what *speaking the word* really means i.e. a human act implying reflection and action. He goes on to suggest that in the culture of silence the masses are *mute*, they are prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformations of their society and therefore prohibited from being.

Hence, it might be argued that these metaphors epitomise the older women's peculiar predicament in that they neither had any contact with the outside world, nor access to literacy lest they find a voice for themselves through literacy and education. Although a *caged bird* is restricted in its movement it can still sing and its voice can reach out to ears outside its confines, whereas these women are *caged* as well as *silent* birds as they are not even heard. *Silent* here is equivalent of *silenced* as their voices are muffled and choked within themselves.

Following is an excerpt from an older woman s' interview:

I must have been eight or nine when I started observing purdah... purdah was so strictly observed that even the air of the (male) servants was not allowed inside the houses, tongas were covered with curtains... if you go out and about you stay sane...I'm beginning to lose my sanity (Interview notes 25/10/97)

The older women's account of their literacy and life histories are full of contradictions and ambivalence. On the one hand they use very strong, powerful and evocative images like *caged birds* and *silent birds.* The metaphors are highly suggestive. On the other hand, they express in-group solidarity when they used phrases: *those times were okay.* They tend to contradict themselves too: *it was better* and yet even *for us it's easier now*. However, the use of such strong and powerful images to describe their peculiar predicament and their childhood experiences reflects some kind of underlying complaint. These women see themselves and their peers as *caged* and *silent birds*, using a universal image for domesticated women who were and still are deprived of their basic rights. They were shut indoors within the confines of their homes from very early on in their lives. Their voices were thus silenced. The women are using an apt image for their lifelong silence. Thus the women from the older generation were not active agents in decision-making about their own lives but rather passive recipients of others' decisions all their lives. They were conditioned to accept others' decisions to the extent that now they have accepted their predicament and no longer question it.

The younger women in the community have far more varied and diversified literacy habits, preferences and practices ranging from the traditional ritual prayers to the most modern and westernised. First of all, this group includes women in their early twenties and late teens, women who have been to English schools and colleges and women who have not received any formal schooling or education at all. The women in this group who have had English schooling are literate in English, Urdu, Arabic, and can fluently read and write in these languages except Arabic which they can only read and use for reading the Koran. As these women mostly come from the landowning class, they have access to English magazines, books including novels, and also to dish channels like CNN and BBC Asia. Some of these women work or have worked so they are not totally confined to the domestic domain, they have had some exposure to the public domain. These women, however, are few and apart from some exceptions, belong to the landowning class. My main informant Nazia is a case in point.

Case study

Nazia was sent to the Murree convent school which is a missionary school where she lived in a boarding house for eleven years until she completed her schooling. Nazia passed her senior Cambridge exam from St Deny's convent in Murree with economics, statistics and mathematics. After that she got admission in another prestigious institution in Lahore, the Kinnaird college for women. She studied combined sciences, French and English literature for her BA degree at Kinnaird. She knows five languages. Her mother tongue is Siraiki but she is also fluent in Urdu and English in addition to Arabic which she can read and French which she learnt at college. Nazia always likes to talk about her childhood and her times in the Murree convent school. She was sent to the Murree convent at the age of four and her life changed forever. During the fieldwork, she would tell me about her life and experiences at the Murree convent with relish: how she used to dress in western clothes, go out with friends and read romantic English novels and books:

our parents did not know what we read (field notes 25/6/96).
And: *Sobia and I were not allowed to show our legs when we were one year old* (field notes 21/12/97).

She would show me pictures of her stay in Murree. In these pictures she stood with girls wearing western clothes. In some they were in gym wear. These pictures are a far cry from what she looks like or wears . Sometimes, we would talk about relationships, love and compromise, about ups and downs in life, about fairy tale passion. Nazi would say:

its good to talk about these things, its exciting, but these are not related to life- time has shown me to be practical (fieldnotes: 21/12/97).
In Lahore, where she went to college, Nazia was very happy: *our life was different there...* (fieldnotes: 24/12/9).

Nazia thinks a person is truly literate if s/he is mentally literate not only literate in terms of reading books. By 'mentally literate' she means that a literate person should be broadminded and liberal enough to accept other people's point of view. To Nazia, her individual identity is more important than her identity as the daughter of Mian Sher. Therefore she wants to be be in control of her own life and make her own decisions: *I want to lead my life as I want to -I can't blindly follow the rules of my ancestors- they are gone and dead* (field notes: 25/12/97).

Nazia dreams to be a strong, career woman. Her dreams and ambitions in life are very different from her mother's or sister's. She wants an independent status as a human being. She likes to read novels by Sidney Sheldon because of his portrayal of women as strong and dominating. She has moved away from reading teenage magazines like *Seventeen* to mature western woman's magazines like *Cosmopolitan*. When I interviewed her, she had just finished reading a novel Daughters by an Iranian author, about a patriarchal society. She said she likes to read books and novels which portray women as dominant characters struggling against odds to carve better lives for

themselves. She also watches Urdu and English soaps on television, such as *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Ang (1985) links the vicarious pleasure women derive from watching soaps like *Dallas* to socially available ideologies. Thus *Dallas* as television fiction offers escape from the mundane. However, she argues, escape is a misleading term because it presupposes a strict division between reality and fantasy. On the contrary, watching *Dallas* serves as an interactive link between the two-reality and fantasy. The pleasure of *Dallas* arises out of the tension between the viewer's identification with and distance from the fictional world.

Although a graduate from the Kinnaird college, Nazia is not satisfied with her education and literacy status. She wants to study more. She thinks that modern western education has changed her perception of things altogether and has inculcated a sense of individualism in her personality. At times, she contradicted herself by claiming that she was taking a stand against the wishes of the entire family not only due to her literacy status but because she happens to be a very strong headed woman and any woman can be like that irrespective of her literacy status. Her brother, however, explicitly linked her confidence to her massive literacy. In his words *literacy is power* and her right to make her own decisions her obnoxious *over-confidence* (field notes 19/2/98).

Conclusion

Ang (1990) observes that doing cultural studies involves participating in an ongoing, open-ended, politically oriented debate, aimed at evaluating and producing a critique of contemporary cultural conditions. Finder's (1997) work also supports the findings of the present study. What happens in actual practice is that people actively and creatively make their own meanings rather than passively absorb pre-given meanings imposed on them. This process of renegotiation and conflicting ideologies becomes evident from the diary extracts of the younger women and from their arguments in focus groups and informal discussions. These are mostly younger women in their twenties and late teens. They question and challenge the existing patriarchal values. These women appear to be disillusioned with the existing roles but do not exactly know how to replace or change them. There are some (e.g. Nazia's case study) who know what they want in life and are knowingly renegotiating their own identity and role in life as well as questioning and challenging the traditional role that society has offered them as a given. Neilsen (1998) has argued that engagements with texts in everyday life help readers and writers to shape their identities (and reshape them in an ongoing process), and that adolescents engage in more fluid, intentional and often more passionate identity play in their encounters with texts.

Although constraints on women's time and space, curtail their access to Urdu and English literacies , diary writing and reading women's magazines in leisure time has special significance in their lives, as they choose times and spaces between gendered domestic activities to indulge in these little pleasures. With examples from the data, it has been suggested that women create an alternative and imaginative culture as opposed to the dominant male culture. Quoting extracts from their diaries and talks, it

has been argued that these literacy practices are not merely temporal excursions, but they imply that this alternative set of values is far more significant to women who are denied a public voice. Thus they endeavour to find a voice for themselves through creative writing. This is their way of establishing their own identity: these non-utilitarian functions of literacy fulfil their innermost needs of self-expression and self-fulfilment; the desire to find a voice and to be recognised as human individuals as opposed to the prescribed social roles of mothers, daughters and wives. Hence, for these women literacy is a means of self-improvement and self-empowerment. I hoped to have shown that younger women have a far more advanced approach to literacy than older women. They are more willing to embrace social change, and a new identity which goes hand in hand with the acquisition of secular literacy because they have more to gain from this, than older women and men. They are less committed than them to the traditionally male-dominated system of agriculture. In focus groups, their language choices also hint at their desire to identify with the mainstream languages, i.e. Urdu and English, which symbolise social prestige and status. Women, especially the younger generation, aspire to wider education rather than literacy as a set of skills. I suggested that the younger women's desire for literacy and education complements their acquisition of English literacy and access to the western media: the younger women negotiate this change through their talk, and literacy activities.

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Glossary

Purdah	=	screen; segragation of sexes at puberty
burka	=	a two-piece garment worn outdoors by women
chaddar	=	a big shawls-like garment worn by women to cover themselves
tongas	=	a horse carriage

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