THE POLITICS OF RADIO ORGANISATION/S II

SPECIAL ISSUE

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This is the second issue of *Southern Review* devoted to radio. Vol. 39.2 (2006), *The Politics of Radio Organisation/s*, elicited a volume of interesting scholarship that recommended a follow up of the theme. As we wrote in our editorial for that first issue, it is still the case that less is written about radio than other media, and this also contributed to our wish to publish more on this particular communication technology. A less direct and longer-term impetus to having *Southern Review* engage substantially with research on radio is the editorial and now advisory board input to the journal of one of the founding contributors of Australian radio history, Mick Counihan. As registered by acknowledgements in the work of other Australian radio scholars, Counihan’s work opened this field and did so in characteristically lucid ways, both empirically grounded and conceptually generative. Our apprehension of radio owes much that is useful, historically informed, and culturally precise to Counihan’s example, though, as in the customary disclaimer, he need take no responsibility for this issue.

Whereas the articles published in 39.2 explored tensions between public and private imperatives (or what various authors approached as rhetorics, discourses, rationalities, and, more loosely again, values or objectives), arising from the ongoing pressures of technological change, and from the uneasy demarcations between commercial, public and community radio, the articles in the current volume have more of a cultural focus. International or transnational, as well as national situations are considered in articles dealing with radio in Australia, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, the UK.

Directly focusing on the cultural, Virginia Madsen’s ‘Cultural Radio at the Crossroads’ discusses and defends ‘cultural radio’ in terms of its scholarly neglect, democratic potential, and impressive lineage and diversity. Here is an impassioned and knowledgeable take on what many have dismissed as part of a discredited Reithian legacy. Madsen’s defence of ethical exemplars and diversities of ‘taste’ in the face of an assumed monolithic hierarchy of taste demanded by governmentality will not convince every reader, but it brings a provocative attention to all those forms of radio not subsumed by a dominant ‘flow’ model, and chronicles a wealth of sources and information about cultural radio internationally.

How to conceive of Australian multiculturalism, a heavily contested domain that continues to exist even with the Howard Federal Coalition Government abjuring longstanding nomenclature in this area, is posed through a discussion of SBS Radio in Christoph Wimmer-Kleikamp’s ‘SBS and the Politics of Mediality’. At the same
time, working with Niklas Luhmann’s theories of communication, the article’s focus on mediality questions the currencies of ‘multimedia’. If Wimmer-Kleikamp’s argument engages with the general question of cultural difference, two articles dealing with radio producers and audiences in, respectively, Afghanistan and Zimbabwe, write about specific cultural differences as they investigate programming that challenges the cultural proprieties of mixed-gender, multi-age, mixed rural and urban audiences. Andrew Skuse, in ‘“Misreading romance”’, studies the production strategies and reception of *New House, New Life*, a long-running edutainment soap opera broadcast by the BBC World Service in Afghanistan, and the calculations and miscalculations involved in this radio intervention into traditional social norms. Winston Mano, in ‘Exploring the Impact of Adult Talk Radio in Zimbabwe’, details the way a popular adult talk programme and its discussion of, amongst other things, intimate relationship issues, has involved audiences negotiating their listening habits and household spaces. Mano’s empirical research demonstrates the tensions between the public form of the broadcast and the more differentiated spaces or *dares* in which Zimbabweans have traditionally talked of ‘private’ or adult matters.

Richard Rudin’s ‘The Politics of the Introduction of Commercial Radio in the UK’ covers the role of the pirate radio stations in the 1960s, how they accustomed audiences to a new kind of commercial popular culture, and, through the debates they engendered within a Labour government and Conservative opposition, how distinctions between authoritarian and libertarian ideologies were increasingly brought to centre stage.

Our opening article, John Tebbutt’s ‘The ABC of Transnational Radio’, sets itself the different task of demonstrating the need for a history of broadcasting that breaks with dominant preoccupations with the national, at least as a sufficient horizon for understanding radio’s forms and developments. Tebbutt demonstrates his case by detailing the American and Canadian provenance of rationales and models for the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s iconic *Country Hour*, the various transnational intersections enabling the figure of the professional broadcaster, and the complex staging of particular professional values as ‘national’ in the emergence of a distinct genre of ‘international news’.
Abstract

This article examines the politics of radio production and consumption in the context of a BBC World Service radio soap opera produced for Afghanistan. Analysis focuses upon romantic narratives promoted within the production by expatriate British BBC trainers and their subsequent rejection by conservative sections of the Afghan audience and amendment by locally employed Afghan scriptwriters and producers. The article elaborates on the cross-cultural negotiation evident between these two creative forces, as well as the extent to which audience conservatism acts back upon the production, in the process framing what is permissible in terms of the cultural propriety of melodramatic and especially romantic content.

Introduction

This article draws upon ethnographic research undertaken on BBC World Service radio soap opera production and consumption in Pakistan and Afghanistan during the late 1990s and upon current inter-disciplinary research examining notions of diaspora, migration and identity as they relate to the wider role of the World Service as an international broadcaster. That the World Service, as a prominent and respected producer of transnational media, draws much of its creative labour from diaspora populations living within the United Kingdom has been documented, though as yet, is not especially well-analysed (Briggs 1970; Walker 1992). These diaspora tend to be language-based, rather than nationally oriented, and are employed by the BBC to (re)produce the discrete ‘language’ services (i.e. Hindi, Persian, Swahili and so on) for which the World Service is internationally renowned.

Whilst we can consider Bush House—the BBC World Service’s main site of radio production located in the Aldwych, London—as an extraordinarily rich diasporic cross-cultural and linguistic contact zone, we also need to consider the function and specific qualities of more localised BBC World Service operations such as the national
offices of the BBC World Service Trust (BBC WST), local BBC news gathering operations and specialist units such as the Afghan Education Projects Unit (BBC AEP) and upon which this article focuses. Within such local operations expatriate British journalists, managers, trainers and producers, as well as local journalist stringers and writers, scriptwriters, actors and producers are engaged in producing a range of melodramatic, factual and news-oriented media content for the aforementioned language services. This results in production contexts characterised by multi-culturalism/linguism and suggests a potential—as does other work on contexts of media production—for significant levels of negotiation over the cultural propriety, melodramatic value and newsworthiness of the media content produced therein (cf. Dornfeld 1998; Graffmann 2004; see Skuse 2002b, 2005a).

This recognition forces us to pay attention to the politics of BBC World Service media production, in particular, but also to the discrete ways in which media is consumed and to specific negotiations that occur between media producers and the audience over content, voiced typically through formal audience evaluation processes and via public criticism and debate. Inevitably, such debate is framed and informed by unique media histories and ecologies that also demand detailed attention. Such histories serve to position the World Service vis-à-vis national and local broadcasters in very specific ways and help us to understand why World Service broadcasting remains enduringly popular in certain contexts and why it is perceived to be more credible and trustworthy than local alternatives. Taking Afghanistan as an example, its media ecology is now marked by a distinct pluralism that has only existed in the recent nominally ‘democratic’ post-Taliban years (2002 onwards). However, during the tenure of the Taliban (Islamic students’ movement) and the Mujahideen (soldiers of Islam) and Communist regimes before them, it was an ecology that displayed minimal intertextuality, minimal freedoms and a distinct propensity towards political and/or religious propaganda (see Skuse 2002a).

During the Communist era, rural audiences lost their trust in state radio, the former mainstay of ‘national’ broadcasting, as the weight of propagandist content in support of radical social and cultural reforms focusing on the emancipation of rural women rose dramatically during the early 1980s (Siddiq 1988; Slobin 1974; Tapper 1984, 1991). In response to shifts in the tenor of broadcast content and the rising tide of national war, Afghan radio listeners increasingly sought more ‘trustworthy’ alternative services, especially for what was locally perceived to be ‘high quality’ and ‘unbiased’ news of the conflict (Skuse 2002a). This, combined with the disintegration of national broadcasting infrastructure during the late 1980s and early 1990s, effectively left the BBC World Service Pashtu and Persian language services as the ‘de-facto’ national broadcasters of Afghanistan for a period of approximately ten years (1992–2002).
The historical and continuing popularity of the BBC World Service Pashtu and Persian Language Services in Afghanistan, which cater to the dominant national cross-ethnic language groups of Pashtu and Dari (Afghan Persian), rests then with a blend of quality news and features programming, as well as popular entertainment genres. Key amongst these genres is soap opera, upon which the remainder of this article focuses. The specific soap opera in question is broadcast to Afghanistan three times per week (fifteen minutes per episode) in the languages of Pashtu and Dari and is titled *Naway Kor, Naway J'wand* (Pashtu) and *Khana-e-nau, Zindagi-e-nau* (Dari), both of which translate as *New Home, New Life*. This title was chosen to reflect the optimism of the post-communist era (1992 onwards) when the large-scale repatriation of the Afghan refugee diaspora was expected, though ultimately never materialised. Produced continuously for nearly 15 years up to the present day, first from Peshawar, Pakistan, and now Kabul, Afghanistan, the soap opera remains enduringly popular and this popularity reflects both saturation levels of radio ownership and, as previously stated, a BBC World Service audience that is burgeoning (see Skuse 2005b).

During the period in which fieldwork was undertaken (late 1990s) the Peshawar offices of the BBC AEP was staffed by British expatriate managers and trainers, as well as local scriptwriters, actors, audience evaluators and administrative staff drawn from the Afghan refugee/diaspora population (there has always been significant historical movement between Pashtu areas of southern Afghanistan and Pashtu areas of northern Pakistan). Here, once famous Afghan playwrights and actors, with strong connections to state broadcasting within Afghanistan, found a new avenue of work in the form of the BBC’s *New Home, New Life* radio drama. Many writers in particular were sympathetic to the Afghan Communist regime that was struggling, with Soviet assistance, to survive throughout the period of the mid-to-late 1990s. Despite such socialist sentiments, most writers were nonetheless well aware of the need to tread carefully when it came to dealing with sensitive social and cultural issues such as romance or the role of women. Indeed, the early development of romantic narratives within *New Home, New Life* provides a useful vehicle for considering the initial production dynamics of soap opera. In keeping with the broad theme of transnational flows, migration and diasporic media production/consumption, we can identify the flow of romantic narratives and romantic ‘ideals’ from one cultural context (United Kingdom) to a radically different context (Afghanistan) as the initial trigger for first internal production, and later wider audience concerns over the appropriateness of the production’s melodramatic content (see Appadurai 1990 on the global flow of ideas/ideology).

With its development-oriented ‘social realist’ pretensions, *New Home, New Life* seeks to draw upon the ‘real’ and the ‘topical’ for its subject matter, in the process affecting an awkward, but ultimately popular, blend of melodrama and humanitarian information (de
Such development-oriented soap opera, or ‘edutainment’ as it is popularly termed, is a genre often described as entertainment that is critically grounded in affairs of the heart, the problematisation of social contradictions, the erosion of cultural tradition and promotion of modernity and social development (Modleski 1982; Rofel 1995; Vink 1988). Inevitably, such productions seek to work through the ‘local’, the ‘traditional’ and the ‘culturally conservative’ if they are to be variously critical of normative culture, as well as popular (Abu-Lughod 2005; Martín-Barbero 1995; cf. Peacock 1968). In the case of *New Home, New Life* this ‘working through’ process applies equally to production staff as it does the soap opera’s audience, as British expatriate trainers and managers sought to recirculate well-worn romantic narratives from Western theatre and local scriptwriters and audiences sought to apply a more local and culturally appropriate lens.

**Romance and Narrative Form in Afghanistan**

As early as 1993, when the BBC AEP were establishing offices in the dusty back streets of University Town, Peshawar, the expatriatedirected training process had instilled the idea that romance, the pursuit of romance and the troubles derived from maintaining romance would be central tenets of scripting and that a substantive amount of *New Home, New Life*’s melodrama would centre upon it. Indeed, Liz Rigbey (1993), one of the production’s initial script development trainers, has argued that romance provides an excellent foil against which many didactic development-oriented themes may be stealthily subsumed. Quite rightly, the issue of romance is critically prioritised in many studies of soap opera and related genres (Abu-Lughod 2005; Ang 1985; Das 1995; Geraghty 1991; Modleski 1982; Radway 1984). However, the experience of the production’s expatriate trainers, such as Rigbey (a producer of BBC Radio 4’s *The Archers*) and Dan Garrett (a specialist radio drama trainer), was very much driven by the notion that good melodrama and strong characterisation and melodramatic content could transcend cultural boundaries. This initially seemed to be the case, as local Afghan creative staff voiced little criticism over such themes. However, the drama manager at the time of fieldwork, Shirazuddin Siddiqui, captures an important and obvious early accommodation made by the newly hired Afghan scriptwriters, namely:

> …the writers were quite obedient because of the economic situation, they didn’t want to lose their jobs, so they didn’t want to reason, they didn’t want to argue, they didn’t want to say ‘no, this is not natural’, or that ‘this is not acceptable’ in Afghan culture (Peshawar, Pakistan, 1996).

Despite this early ‘obedience’, the concern that particularly romantic narratives might be ‘unacceptable’ to conservative sections
among Afghan audiences quickly emerged as a ‘hot topic’ of feedback from internal audience evaluation and the informal discussion that occurred between writers in the context of the BBC AEP office ‘writing room’, an informal space in which writers could develop scripts and new scripting ideas. Indeed, the overtly negative reception of an initial storyline concerning love, romance and marriage played an important role in defining the course of the soap opera’s melodramatic narratives and the socio-cultural caution with which they were subsequently produced. In this regard, and with the benefit of hindsight, the production’s expatriate manager, John Butt, reveals:

There are some things that Afghans like to keep private. You can’t deal too overtly with family planning, with things to do with sex, things to do with love and there’s homosexuality…it would be detrimental to the more important messages which we’re covering and the women would not be able to listen to us, because they would be embarrassed to hear such things in front of other people [men] in the house (Peshawar, Pakistan, 1996).

Many of the BBC’s Afghan scriptwriters were familiar with rural audiences and rural tastes, many having been brought up in the blanket of villages that extend themselves across the south and north of the country. Given this, they were also aware that narrative preferences tended to lie elsewhere, in the themes of tragic heroism, morality and honour that are typical of traditional storytelling forms (Boesen 1983; Dupree 1980; Edwards 1996; Grima 1993; Mills 1990). Ethnography revealed that the replication of cultural normativity in narrative performance, such as storytelling, relates to what many rural listeners and opinion leaders deem permissible and impermissible in radio broadcasting. This being in spite of the fact that much private discussion, especially between rural Afghan men, is often extremely coarse and concerns issues such as pre-marital sex, romance or adultery (Ickx 1992; Knabe 1977). Further, it is not especially uncommon for young women who are married to much older men via arranged marriages to seek romance, usually within the extended family, despite the punishment for adultery being death by public stoning. Importantly, adultery only becomes a problem and shameful if it becomes clear and open public knowledge (Ickx 1992; Tapper 1981, 1984).

The ability to pursue sexual indiscretions does not represent a challenge to normative patterns of marriage in either town or countryside. This is because young men and women realise that self-determination, romance and love within marriage is generally unattainable, since marriages are ‘made’ for strategic purposes so as to keep land, money and women within the extended family, hence the normative practice of parallel cousin marriage (Tapper 1991). Lindholm (1982) has suggested that for the Pashtun (the ethnic group that straddles northern Pakistan and southern Afghanistan) romance ‘can never be with one’s own spouse’ since romance is always a matter that invari-
ably involves the pursuit of others, often the unobtainable women of khans (wealthy landlords). In a sense, it is the ideal of ‘dangerous love’ and risk that draws men and women to pursue ‘affairs’. The often harsh and conflictual relations of marriage and domestic life in Afghanistan are countered in traditional narrative forms, the crux of which is to keep alive the ‘ideal’ of romance rather than its actuality. Indeed, Lindholm suggests that:

…the distasteful complications of reality explain why the romantic tales of the Pukhtun inevitably end in the deaths of the lovers. In death the romance lives, whereas in marriage romance is dead (1982, p. 224).

The hopes invested in ‘happy’ or ‘romantic’ marriages, or via the idealisation of mysterious and romantic infidelity, represent a critical arena of expression and escapism in which the existing social order is challenged through the aspirations, dreams and the poetic, but again ‘private’, narrations of the young (Boesen 1983). Soap opera as a genre is, in many ways, perceived in a similar vein, as a channel of romantic escapism and a means of challenging the normative, the natural and the patriarchal (Abu-Lughod 1995; Modleski 1982). Implicit in many critical analyses of the genre is the sense of utopianism that it affords audiences, women in particular. The frequent transgressions of normative culture and temporary subversion of the power of patriarchy are perceived to lie at the crux of the audience pleasures of women (Abu-Lughod 2005; Ang 1985; Das 1995). The fictive exploration of romantic relationships and those in which women are seen to be in control of their own destinies, especially within the world of public life, serves to dissolve some of the bitterness of other fictive relationships and disrupt the hegemony of patriarchal power. Radway’s (1984) work on the reading of romance novels suggests this provides many female readers a degree of escapism from the prosaic nature of their own domestic lives, enabling them to imagine a number of romantic alternatives.

Drawing on Dyer’s (1981) work on the genre of light entertainment, Geraghty (1991) argues that soap opera is capable of showing female audiences both what an ‘ideal world might look like’ and what it might ‘feel like’. Though this ‘ideal world’ is predicated on the romantic fulfilment of personal relationships, it can also be seen to act as an escape from some of the hardships of everyday life, such as poverty, unemployment and domestic routine. In the same way, New Home, New Life’s initial expatriate trainers and managers assumed that the unproblematic, though largely ethnocentric, representation of romance could serve a similar function, in the process lightening the otherwise troubled lives of its Afghan listeners. With newly recruited Afghan scriptwriters, thankful for employment and reticent in voicing their concerns over the cultural propriety of openly broadcasting romantic narratives, it was nonetheless ‘agreed’ that New Home, New Life would begin its run with the dramatisation of an ‘open’ romance.
The goal of this particular narrative was to discourage the punitive practice of *wolwar* (brideprice) payments in arranged marriages and promote mutual consent, therein openly promoting the ‘ideal’ of the love match and romantic marriage, a topic conventionally reserved for closed and private narrations (Tapper 1981, 1984, 1991). It is at this point that our story can begin.

**Sarwar and Gulalai: A Romance**

In the first episode of the *New Home, New Life* soap opera broadcast in 1993, the family of Nek Mohammad is heard returning to their home in Upper Village, a house that they had occupied before fleeing Afghanistan as a result of war. It is here that the characters of Gulalai and Sarwar begin to emerge. Gulalai is the well-educated eldest daughter of Nek Mohammad and is constructed as a progressive ‘moral guide’ within the production. Being a health worker, the character plays an important didactic role, one who is used to subverting cultural restrictions on the employment of women (principally during the Mujahideen and Taliban eras) in health clinics and hospitals.3 Sarwar is the eldest son of Jabbar Khan, the local landlord and ‘big man’. This particular character serves as a negative and conservative role model for listeners, one that is quickly drawn into tense conflict with Gulalai’s brother Karim over Jabbar Khan’s appropriation of his father’s land on which opium poppies are now being grown. Feuds aside, things soon become more complicated by the revelation that Sarwar has strong feelings for Gulalai.

Once realising that his enemy is Gulalai’s brother, Sarwar tries to be pleasant to him and it soon emerges that Gulalai also has feelings for Sarwar. Openly confirming these feelings, she gives him an embroidered handkerchief which serves as a material token of her new found affection. In another scene, Sarwar is heard to be hiding near the *goder* (water collection point) so as to speak discreetly with Gulalai. Here, he thanks her for the embroidered handkerchief, suggesting that he will keep it forever and that it represents a love token between them. During a later meeting the two are spotted by Gulalai’s mother, Rabia Gul, who is furious with her for allowing it to occur. Subsequently, she forbids Gulalai from continuing her public duties as a health worker and stops her visiting friends. Since Sarwar is unable to see Gulalai, he decides to reciprocate her gift with a gift of his own, a gold ring. The go-between for this exchange is Shaperay, Sarwar’s sister, who gives Gulalai the ring at the *goder*. She is delighted and exclaims that since the ring fits it must have been made for her.

The romance between Sarwar and Gulalai is heard to be halting and tangled with numerous sub-plots, chief amongst them being the revelation that Sarwar stole opium from his father in order to purchase the ring. This is followed by the accusation that Sarwar is himself...
smoking opium. The suspicions surrounding Sarwar’s behaviour are confirmed when he is caught smoking by the Khan and his overseer Nazir in the nearby fields with his new friend Karim. Later in the hujra (male house), Sarwar is berated by his father for stealing the opium and for smoking it. Jabbar Khan accentuates his words by beating his son with a stick. The Khan becomes so mad that he asks Nazir to get his gun so that he can kill him, but is instead persuaded to have Sarwar taken to the health clinic, because in Nazir’s words he is ‘half-dead already’. Later, when Gulalai meets Shaperay at the goder, she scolds Shaperay for not telling her that Sarwar had become an addict and from this moment on decides to act unconcerned about his plight. This reaction quickly gets back to Sarwar, who goes to the clinic to confront Gulalai with the news that he smokes opium because he loves her, but is unable to see her.

Gulalai reacts angrily to this revelation and tells Sarwar that he is blaming her for his own problems and that she never wants to see him again. In turn, Sarwar forlornly tells her that if he never sees her again he will surely die. On returning home he dramatically tells his sister to bring him a cake of opium so that he can kill himself. Shaperay tries to dissuade him and so Sarwar begs her to intervene and talk to Gulalai on his behalf, but threatens that if no good news comes by the following day then his life... He is heard to smash a glass on the ground and, though he doesn’t say so, is clearly threatening suicide.

At the clinic, Gulalai tells Sarwar that she will never see him again unless he stops taking opium. This he does, but he becomes quiet and withdrawn, to the concern of his father, who decides that it would be a very good time for his son to become engaged. Shaperay asks Jabbar Khan about the choice of girl for her brother Sarwar and he vaguely replies that he already knows who to choose. Jabbar Khan suggests that an engagement with Gulalai would mean having to give up the land they had earlier appropriated from her family. Because of this, it emerges that the he will allow Sarwar to marry any girl except Gulalai. However, Shakoor, the Khan’s nephew and local military commander, supports Sarwar’s claim to be allowed to marry the girl he loves and these words sway Jabbar Khan to the extent that he tells Sarwar that if he mends his ways he will be allowed to marry Gulalai.

Sarwar quickly reforms his behaviour on being promised that he can marry the bride of his choice, though this still leaves the ongoing land dispute between the two families to be settled and no firm marriage arrangements made. Finally, with the land issue on the verge of a solution, the Khan visits Nek Mohammad, the aim of which is the solicitation of Gulalai for Sarwar. Nek Mohammad listens carefully, but makes no instant decision, suggesting that he will discuss it with his family and establish Gulalai’s feelings on the matter. Gulalai’s mind is made up, but her mother disapproves of the match, though is eventually talked around. After this, the engagement is agreed and the family of Nek Mohammad decide not to ask for a woluwar (brideprice),
deciding that it was enough for there to be good relations between the two families.

**Cultural Conservatism as ‘localisation’**

Still finding their feet with a new creative genre and the considerable pressure of production schedules, both local scriptwriters and expatriate trainers and producers were stung by conservative criticisms emanating from audience feedback via routine quarterly BBC AEP audience evaluation over their portrayal of what was perceived as an ‘open’ and disgraceful romance. The drama manager Shirazuddin Siddiqui recalls that ‘…it created a lot of objections from Mullahs…and that’s why the writers and the production team got rid of that storyline’. Concern was also voiced by older listeners, by parents and in particular, by male household heads. Whilst many younger listeners enjoyed the romance, the religious establishment and older generations inevitably exerted far more public influence, an influence that was of deep concern to the fledgling drama production.

In a sense, it was the openness of this particular romantic narrative, the manner in which it made public that which more typically remains unstated in Afghan culture and society, rather than the specifics of the storyline, that ran against the grain of conservative sentiment. Indeed, ethnography revealed that it was widely felt that the storyline sent the wrong sort of ‘message’ to young men and women, one that encouraged them to collude in romantic trysts and pursue idealised marriages based upon romance and love, this standing as a significant affront to strategic marriage alliances, the sexual sanctity of women and female honour within *Pashtun* society especially. It was not that the storyline was inaccurate in its portrayal of the ‘potential’ for romance or that it did not feature a degree of conservative response within it, this being evident in the control that the respective parents of Sarwar and Gulalai try to exert. Rather, it was the social mobility of the female character and the manner in which the storyline’s intimacies were publicly revealed that stirred conservative audience opinion. In this respect, a broad majority of male and female listeners considered Gulalai to have far too much autonomy in decision-making and to be worryingly unrestrained by the cultural conventions of *purdah*, therein bringing dishonour and shame to the household.

Being designed to reflect a progressive stance, the character of Gulalai can be seen to represent the fulcrum for social change and women’s emancipation that is advocated within the soap opera. Here, the right to women’s self-determination in marriage closely reflects past modernising drives promoted by the Afghan Communist Government (1977–1992) who sought to abolish the practice of *wolwar* (brideprice) wholesale (Ickx 1992; Tapper 1984). Nonetheless, such an overtly modern stance articulated poorly with the conservative body of opinion in rural *Pashtun* communities. The critical subtext of the
storyline, which valorised both women's education and the service that working women can provide their communities, tended to elude many rural listeners, especially parents concerned with the public reputations of their pre-marriage age daughters.

By openly representing or stating that which remains unstated in Afghan culture and society, the production stepped into dangerous broadcast territory. By applying the melodramatic, albeit ethnocentric, logic of 'romance as a means of imaginative flight' the fledgling soap opera production risked everything. With mounting criticism emanating from conservative quarters, local creative and gatekeeping forces soon promoted a reformist influence, this being clearly recalled by John Butt, the production’s general manager:

It wasn’t the scriptwriters really; it was us [the expatriate staff] with our western ideas. We had the idea that soap opera had to have romance; I don’t think we actually considered the culture enough at that stage. The writers went along with this [for the sake of their jobs] and it was our co-broadcaster Radio Pakistan that was wary about the story and they were the ones who were unhappy about it. We agreed with them eventually. Also, the response of listeners was quite negative. A woman wrote in and said ‘what lesson had she learned from the drama? She learnt that she wouldn’t ‘let her daughter out of the house for education or anything because, if they do, they get a boyfriend and will be unmarryable’. It was right, you have to sacrifice the storyline if it is undermining a key objective like promoting female education. Romance isn’t that important to Afghan life, there’s enough drama in Afghan life without that (Peshawar, Pakistan, 1996).

In the face of audience criticism and concerns raised by the local partner Radio Pakistan, the Afghan creative staff became increasingly emboldened in voicing their own concerns over the open representation of this particular romantic storyline. Despite this, it is neither easy nor desirable for any soap opera production simply to rid itself of this or that troublesome storyline. This leaves gaps in the continuity of narrative and dramatic structure, as well as an audience confused over its disappearance. Indeed, rather than take this extreme course of action producers decided that the Sarwar and Gulalai storyline content and structure would be subject to significant degrees of moderation and modification. Cultural propriety had, if you like, won the day.

In BBC AEP production, consensual decision-making tends to define and delineate the culturally appropriate and inappropriate, regardless of degree of actual cultural or social accuracy. This occurs through regular script development meetings during which challenges to cultural accuracy or thematic content may be made. Though New Home, New Life’s representation of rural society actually contains a range of purposeful generalisations that significantly simplify the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Afghanistan in order to reduce
complexity in scripting and production processes, it is now well-recognised by both the Afghan scriptwriters and expatriate producers that conservative rural listeners actively demand a degree of decorum in their radio broadcasting (see Skuse 2002b for an examination of the scope of social realism relating to New Home, New Life). Despite being charged with helping to advance women’s emancipation, conservative criticism gave the scriptwriters the impetus that they needed to express themselves in a more cautious manner, one more befitting of rural opinion. Further, this led to the realisation that the production must work through normative culture and conservatism and challenge it more obliquely, rather than challenge it overtly and head-on. Looking back at the Sarwar and Gulalai romance, the openness of their intimate conversations at the goder (water collection point), the love tokens that they exchange and their determination to marry one another, were heard to be quickly submerged beneath the far more typical and culturally normative concerns of solicitation and negotiations around an engagement. Though aspired towards and often practised, it can be restated that romance is only deemed an acceptable part of Pashtun culture when it remains secret.

The example of the Sarwar and Gulalai romance suggests that working against normative culture by overtly and radically problematising sensitive issues such as brideprice or self-determination in marriage was not the best way for a fledging media production to proceed. Recognition that romance should be returned to the imaginations of listeners ironically served to locate romance where it perhaps always should have been: in the creative, idealistic and often fatalistic projections of listeners. This realisation resulted in the production turning to smaller, less inflammatory, spaces of social and cultural critique framed by a more traditional and normative approach to public criticism as voiced in Afghan oratory modes, such as storytelling, through obliqueness and metaphor. Though now veiled, oblique or metaphorical, it is towards this more tentative form of expression, in which small areas of intimacy and criticism are defined from within the bounds of normative cultural process, that the Afghan scriptwriters turned (cf. Mills 1990 & 1991).

Remaining relevant and culturally appropriate requires careful attention to detail and the conservatism that pervades Pashtun society in particular. In this respect, Shirazuddin Siddiqui, the then drama manager recalls:

I edited something out of the synopsis stage recently...because it wasn’t at all culturally appropriate. It was the Khan going to Sher Mohammad’s house for the solicitation of his sister Shukria, for Nazir. Then on the day of Eid, Sher Mohammad goes to offer Jabbar Khan Eid greetings and whilst there asks the rest of the people who have come to Jabbar Khan’s hujra to excuse him because he wants to talk to Jabbar Khan privately about the solicitation of Shukria for Nazir. Then, the rest of the
people leave and he tells him that his sister doesn’t agree with the marriage. This would never happen in Afghanistan! If someone is asking for your sister you would never go to his house and say these words. The person has to come to your house and then you could tell him that your sister doesn’t agree or else he would send a messenger. He may have a matchmaker and then you just tell the matchmaker to deal with it. Anyway, solicitation usually begins with women, but then it’s passed on to men. If men start it, it’s never direct. For example, we are friends and we know each other. I’ll come to you and I’ll say ‘I’ve been thinking about how we can make our friendship and close relationship even closer. I don’t know about you, but I think it’s quite important for us.’ Then you might say, ‘I can’t really comment, I can’t really say anything on it.’ Then I would feel that I have consent from you and I must pursue the issue, so then I’d send a representative to your house. Because I could see that you’re not opposing it…In our culture if you don’t oppose it you are actually confirming it (Peshawar, Pakistan, 1996).

Though reflecting the conversational obliqueness Mills (1991) identified in Afghan storytelling, we can see that attention to detail, conservative cultural detail, had now become acute within the production. Further, inadvertently generating negative audience criticism was now seen by producers and funders to deflect from the soap opera’s future potential to problematise certain sensitive themes, marriage included. In a short time, production values shifted and the soap opera thereafter chose to raise anomalies of socio-cultural practice from within a more culturally competent (conservative) and narratively acceptable (oblique and metaphorical) context. Whilst this strategy allowed for the production’s key dramatic narratives to be appropriated and replicated in listeners’ own ‘diagnostic’ discussions without overstepping sensitive cultural boundaries, ethnography revealed that many younger listeners continued to bemoan the continuation of negative cultural practices, such as forced marriage. Such sentiment is reflected in the comments of a young female listener who pleaded with the production to maintain a focus on the practices of brideprice and arranged marriages:

I was at my relative’s today to celebrate a marriage [betrothal] and I was hearing all different things. First of all, I can’t name the man because he’s forty-two years old and is marrying a girl of fifteen who can read and write! His house is in Peshawar [Pakistan] and many women were asking ‘How was this marriage arranged?’ Or that it was just for the sake of money. This man is in a foreign country and is even older than her father! Some women were saying that this issue should be taken up by New Home, New Life and that giving a child for the sake of money to any kind of man shouldn’t be done (Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 1997).
Critically, youth constitutes a far less powerful segment of the audience, and as such, has a weaker voice than older generations. Despite such concerns there remains very little scope for alternatives to normative patterns of marriage exchange (badal) within Afghanistan, whether symmetrical or asymmetrical. Most women recognise that not marrying may lead to social stigmatism and questions as to why ‘such and such’ a girl’s family has not managed to find a marriage match. Thus, while it is recognised that women are like ‘chattels’, to be bought and sold as and when required, and that marriage may be difficult, loveless and abusive, young women aspire to it in the hope that they might find love with a good-looking and young husband or security with a sympathetic and wealthier older man.

Conclusion

Because it became more conservative in its representational scope, we should not think that the New Home, New Life soap opera is neither radical nor emancipatory. Indeed, the range of critical localising forces (both internal and external) that have acted upon it have served to strengthen its representation in the critical area of its cultural propriety considerably. Here, overtly radical emancipatory themes, such as open romance and a head-on challenge to the practice of brideprice (wolwar), gave way to recognition that if change is to be effected at all then it must be done so slowly, carefully and from within a familiar cultural and moral context. Indeed, it was often suggested by male and female informants alike that the pace of social change in urban areas during the communist years in Afghanistan could never have been maintained because it was simply too radical and not understood by rural people (cf. Anderson 1983; Edwards 1996; Shahrani 1986; Tapper and Tapper 1988; Tapper 1983).

This sentiment articulates well with Peacock’s (1968) notion of ‘rites of modernisation’ and Martín-Babero’s (1995) work on the telenovela in Latin America, both of whom suggest that social change is best presented, understood and effected when it is worked through the local, the traditional and to an extent, the conservative. Whilst both the BBC AEP and its funders had sought an initially radical agenda, it was quickly realised that radical narratives could result in the programme being ‘lost’ and, therein, a critical chance to contribute to the humanitarian effort during the worst years of the Afghan civil war (1992–2002). The conflict and accommodation evident between production and audience, as well as between the expatriate trainers and Afghan scriptwriters highlights the extent to which such productions ‘work’ themselves out culturally. The slippage between the expatriate trainer’s sense of the permissible and local notions of cultural propriety and narrative style reflect the politics of both production and consumption. Given this, the example of New Home, New Life seems to exemplify the notion that the BBC World Service more broadly may be
characterised as a contact zone in which considerable cross-cultural negotiation occurs in the working out of production values, narratives and representational strategies.

Though *New Home, New Life* is not a utopian soap opera in the sense of a romantic escape from everyday life, the production still provides spaces of critique and longing without necessarily challenging normative society and the order of things in the head-on fashion it once did (Mills 1990, 1991). The desire to effect social change in Afghanistan must always be tempered by the need to work through forces of conservatism. This was true of conservative reactions to radical reforms of the communist era (such as the abolition of bride price [*wolwar*] and forced literacy classes for rural women) and it is true of overtly public radio soap opera storylines concerning romance. Whilst sections of the audience inevitably retain the ability to ‘read-in’ romance to increasingly obliquely romantic storylines, other sections directly ‘read’ romance as an affront to normative cultural expectations concerning the sexual sanctity of women and the right to make a strategic marriage match, rather than a romantic one. Importantly, it was the expatriate trainers and managers who ‘misread’ romance in the early days of production, incorrectly assuming that a more Western and liberal style of romantic narrative could be applied cross-culturally. In time, the Afghan scriptwriters ultimately intervened and wrested control of narrative content as their confidence increased and, in the process, overlaid a more stealthy and traditional form of critique, one in which what is not said is as important as that which is (Mills 1990, 1991).

Ultimately, it is the initial critique of the production’s narrative content and the creative response to it that has made the *New Home, New Life* production a radical and hugely successful media intervention. In introducing a more traditional approach to its narrative structure and flow it was able to develop a more cautious approach to challenging social norms and contradictions and thereby establish itself as a media mainstay within Afghanistan. Simply put, the production remains radical because it is conservative.

**Notes**

1 This paper draws upon ethnographic fieldwork research conducted in Pakistan and Taliban-controlled Afghanistan during the late 1990s. This work is currently being extended under a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council grant (AH/E58693/1) led by the Open University and titled “‘Tuning in’: Diasporic Contact Zones at the BBC World Service’.

2 Mills’s (1990, 1991) work on Afghan oral tradition suggests that the key creative criteria of oration are that of juxtaposition and complexity, with differing genres of story and discourse being skilfully woven into a rhetorical performance that serves a range of critical, satirical, sarcastic and culturally normative purposes. Here, degrees of cultural normativity can be said to be generated via the recollection and performance of tragedy,
whether the tragedy of legend or of everyday life (Grima 1993). Within Afghan society familiar themes such as the rustic fool or hypercognised discourses—such as those centring on Islam and honour—provide for the fundamental elements of storytelling. Yet, as Mills suggests, it is the performative juxtaposition of ‘story to story, story to self, and story to community’ that allows for a degree of unpredictability and critique to emerge during oration.

Rules issued in 1996 by the Taliban authorities strictly control health services and especially the provision of care. Here, female patients are generally only permitted to see female doctors, though should it be necessary for them to see a male doctor, one of her immediate male relatives should be present. For female patients the wearing of full veil (burqa) must be observed and male doctors are only permitted to touch ‘affected parts’ of the female body. Ideally, separate waiting rooms and facilities should be provided for men and women and interaction between doctors and nurses of the opposite sex is strictly forbidden, as is a male doctor entering a female ward at night or a female doctor wearing ‘fashionable clothes’. In the words of the Taliban rules, female doctors should not ‘trim themselves up’.

The term badal can be used in two distinct ways. First, to ‘take’ badal is equated with the taking of physical revenge, or more often in the form of a cash payment, material transaction or the giving of a girl to an aggrieved family. Second, families can ‘do’ badal, which can be translated as exchange, as it is in a context concerning marriage. Though often confused in academic texts, the distinction is an important one which once recognised becomes self-evident. Ideally, marriage exchange should eventually reach a state of equilibrium, with the bride’s family giving their daughter in order to receive a bride for one of their own sons at a later date. However, due to contemporary economic difficulties engagements can be long and concerns over whether sufficient wolwar will be raised, represents a key aspect of male gham. Consequently, an inability to meet the wolwar payment forces many young village men to migrate both out of shame and economic necessity.

The poor economic environment means that many families have difficulties raising the amount of brideprice required, this being especially relevant to the daughters of khans, who often demand a significantly higher brideprice. Though marriage matches are seldom refused, a family may have difficulty arranging a marriage match if their daughter is known to be ill, disabled or mentally disturbed.

References


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