

Filming *Beggars of Lahore*: Some Reflections

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The documentary *Beggars of Lahore*, shot in 2005 and released in 2010, represents a journey into the streets of Pakistan's second largest city and cultural hub. It examines the reasons that went into some people taking to begging; traces the growth of the "beggar's mafia," if one may use this term; provides some case studies of beggars; and interviews advocates, human rights activists, politicians, and general public. The documentary is 45 minutes in length. A five-minute trailer of the film is available at the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNWQcJoGILg>

Introduction

Who am I and how did I get into a project like this? I will begin with my background. My father moved from Lahore to the UK in the 1960's, leaving behind my mother and my two eldest brothers. He set himself up with a job and a social network, along with a place to accommodate his young family. My mother joined him two years later with another addition to the family, my third brother, who was just three months old. My sister was born in the UK much later, followed by myself.

As a British Pakistani, I was raised respecting Pakistani Muslim values, culturally and religiously. Hence, we all grew up within a Punjabi-speaking home environment. Over time the community of Pakistani Punjabis grew in Birmingham, and we regarded and still regard this as our family. One of the reasons my father stayed in Birmingham as opposed to moving to London was because of his social network. My father, meanwhile, set up one of the very first South Asian video rental outlets, and this allowed me to grow up watching the latest Bollywood and Hollywood films, which nurtured in me a love for films and

film production.

I visited Lahore when I was a little girl in the 1980's. Even at that age I felt the stark contrast between life in the UK and in Pakistan. I found it dusty, hot, and crowded with people and traffic, but I liked it. I knew even at that age that this was where mother and father grew up and its culture and language were part of my being. This was the only time I visited Pakistan during my childhood. My parents were concerned about our studies and did not want to distract us by sending us to Pakistan for holidays. I did my undergraduate studies in East Mediterranean history, followed by a degree in law, and I enjoyed my practice in criminal and children's law.

Film and Television journalism was where my heart was ever since I was an undergraduate student, and a visit to Lahore to attend my cousins' weddings in 2004 sowed a seed that took its own time to germinate. The phenomenon of begging in the city was right before my eyes and was not easy to evade. Upon returning to the UK, I decided that research and academia was what I really wanted to pursue, and Lahore and its beggars were going to have a role in this. I prepared myself academically to handle this multi-faceted subject. I also sought permission from the authorities at the Shrine of Data Ganj Bakhsh, established rapport with others who could help, contacted potential interviewees, and so on.¹ What surrounded the visuals for me then and even now is a great deal of emotion. I saw different categories of beggars, some of whom evoked more sympathy than others. I have included a cross-section of these beggars in my documentary, in an attempt to give the viewer a complete overview.

Research Questions

Why would anybody need to beg in this day and age? Is it an act of desperateness, as that individual has no other means of earning a living, or is it simply a lack of self-morale? Can we apportion the existence of begging on our social attitudes, whereby beggars have become complacent and rely on hand-outs? Does begging exist because people have turned it into a profession, or does it exist because a particular State has neglected the poor? (Saeed 2007, p. 1)

Obtaining numbers for people begging is difficult owing to the very fluid nature of the begging population (Saeed 2016). However, figures for those living below the poverty line are worrying. According to a statistic released in 2016 by the ruling party, 60 million Pakistani citizens were living below the poverty line

(Khan 2016). In 2005 I witnessed this poverty too. However, although there is a vast amount of begging that stems from this poverty, I also noticed the indigenous practice of almsgiving on a vast scale. The country has a rich history in shrine culture and Lahore itself is infamous for this, being the cultural hub of Pakistan. There are numerous shrines within the historic walled city, with the largest one being the Shrine of Ali Hajveri, the patron saint of Lahore, more commonly known as *Data Ganj Bakhsh*. I first noticed the practice of almsgiving around *Data Ganj Bakhsh*, where I made numerous visits. This is the largest Shrine in Lahore and food is distributed throughout the day. The veneration of Sufi Saints is called *ziyarat*, and the intricacies of understanding this practice, which is part of a wider mystical dimension of Islam, is a vast topic and one which it is not possible to explain at great length here. In short, this tradition involves followers of Sufi saints entering into a supplication to a higher entity, and people across the world who belong to a range of faiths, or none, all may engage in it. In the context of Islam, some Muslims make an intercessory prayer to God, via a Sufi Saint, by a visit to the Saint's tomb, technically termed "visitation" (Lewis 1985). There is a controversial debate surrounding the legitimacy of such practices, and certain Muslims following a more conservative approach to the religion go so far as condemning them as *shirk* (polytheism) or *bidat* (innovation). When such visitors come to the shrine, they are in a mindset to distribute food and money amongst the needy, and it was here that I discovered a community of beggars.

On the whole, beggars are viewed with negative stereotypes and regarded as "other." As I interviewed a cross-section of society in the field it became apparent that there were many "ways of seeing" (Berger 2008) and as a result many gazes, ranging from a developmentalist gaze to lay people sharing a touristic gaze, which was often hostile. Indeed, media representations of beggars too are often negative and this is true of the developed Western world as well as the developing world (Waugh and Pidd 2014; Doward 2013; Sweeney 2011). In the context of South Asia, there are numerous articles that demonise begging but also many that sympathise with the beggars (Boyle 2008; Dave 2004; Sweeney 2011). However, one important issue that is rarely mentioned is that of illegal networks that run beggar rings, also often referred to as the "mafia." Often mafias are depicted as a social evil, and indeed, if they are being run by people who are exploiting the beggars they are hiring then this really is something which should be controlled. Those that go a step further and mutilate beggars to increase sympathies of donors are even more reprehensible. However, much of the general public has come to believe that all beggars belong to the "mafia" and that they

should not therefore be given donations, as it would not better them. Many of the beggars who I interviewed in 2005 believed that this stance was taken by many of the middle class in an attempt to ignore the beggar population.

I myself felt a certain empathy towards what seemed to me a disenfranchised group of people who were begging as a last resort, and this led to my desire to research the topic. I wasn't funded for this project. As a result of my legal background, the framework of the documentary, *Beggars of Lahore* (Saeed 2007), revolved around three core questions. First, why is there so much begging in Lahore? Second, is begging justified? And third, are there any solutions? In retrospect, these questions provided the framework for how I approached the topic at the time of producing the documentary. What at first sight seemed like an easily answered question—why there is so much begging in Lahore?—was in fact a very difficult question to answer, as it opened up a wide range of reasons for the phenomenon encompassing the social, socio-economic, religious, political. It was one strand of the answer to this first question that led to my second, the questions of whether begging is justified. Here I was focusing on the religious aspect of giving. Islam is the predominant religion in the country, and although begging is prohibited, almsgiving is one of the five pillars of Islam, and this sets up the donor-recipient relationship (Singer 2008). The last question, that of solutions, veers towards an almost impossible optimism and may indeed be impossible to answer as a result of the complexities associated with the phenomenon. As a self-reflexive piece, this paper will focus on the practices I observed and the reactions of my informants to my entrance into their world. With regards to the beggars, not all were forthcoming. It was only after I made several trips to the various sites that I created a rapport with them, after which they understood why I wanted to interview them and were happy to participate.

In documenting the beggars of Lahore, I sought to establish a realistic visual record of a section of society that I felt was being neglected by the mainstream. The film is an attempt to humanise the issue of begging in a city to which I feel I belong. I attempted to bring a sense of realism to the complexities of the topic in order to argue that it should not be perceived in a binary fashion, as belonging to either noble traditions or the criminal world. My diasporic cultural identity also impacted my representation of the issue of begging.

Method and Process

I chose an audio-visual format to present a critique of begging, as presenting the

issue in a documentary form enabled me to show the vast, ambivalent and complex issue of begging in an accessible and aesthetically pleasing yet politically conscious manner, with a perspective that aims to encourage human compassion.

The documentary format was appealing because I see begging as a contemporary issue that requires immediate attention. Hence, the attraction of the documentary format for me was very much for the same reasons as Nichols:

The pleasure and appeal of documentary film lies in its ability to make us see timely issues in need of attention, literally. We see views of the world, and what they put before us are social issues and cultural values, current problems and possible solutions, actual situations and specific ways of representing them. (Nichols, 1991).

Begging as a social issue can also be seen as a cultural value; by some it is seen as a current problem. A dichotomy of views will unfold, where one perspective brings forward a cultural rationale for begging, while another believes that the concept of begging has been exploited by people who have turned it into a profession. Although *Beggars of Lahore* has a social responsibility to represent the matter in an engaging manner, following Grierson, it departs from his rationale as it sets out to convey an argument through a gaze (my own), and through control over the actors/interviewees (in designing the argument I wish to convey to my audience).

Conveying social responsibility in a meaningful and succinct manner via a documentary is very important to me. With regard to aesthetics, Dziga Vertov, a Russian filmmaker of the same period as Grierson, used creative techniques that were avant-garde. *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) is a silent documentary that is renowned for its cinematic techniques, breaking the mould of linear film. He was of the opinion that film was a cinematic language and at the start of *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), states this in the inter-titles.

In producing a film that involves people living on the margins, an obvious issue of ethics and visual ethnography arises. Are people being exploited? Given the personal attachment and motivation for the project, my aim was consistently to give a voice to the beggars in their struggle against poverty. The film expresses a feeling of empathy for its subjects. As a filmmaker and an academic, I also had a responsibility to present the issue in an impartial way. I had to therefore fuse the two ways of seeing (the personal and academic) via film in a way that was not forcing a particular opinion to the audience. This would involve a heteroglossic text with a number of different voices highlighting the many sides to the begging

phenomenon and in particular the dichotomy that is present when people speak of begging, either associating it to criminal activity (which by law it is) or by culturally legitimating it, either by giving alms to beggars in order to meet the charity element of their religion, or as a moral, secular duty.

With regard to interviewees, I wanted to present the diverse range of views of the begging phenomenon. Therefore, in collating interviewees I had to obtain consent from both members of the government and opposition parties. I also sought views from a range of different arenas, such as religious representatives, social welfare organisations belonging to the government, and non-government organisations. With regards to this polyphony, the most important voices for me were the beggars and the views of the public. For those I could only wait until I was in Lahore.

The aim was therefore, to collate the above diverse materials and provide audio-visual access to the begging phenomenon, which would bring immediacy to the issue (Chouliaraki 2006). This would also meet my initial personal interest and the academic need to present this phenomenon in the most objective manner possible. Seeing poverty on television, in documentaries and commercials belonging to charities, is unsettling, but seeing the density of the begging phenomenon in Lahore firsthand came as a shock to me. I saw it from a perspective that was very much touristic (Favero 2007), and I was not able to understand the phenomenon as I was overwhelmed and possibly undergoing a culture shock. Although I had seen begging in the U.K., I had not witnessed it as so widespread. When trying to assess the severity of the situation, I asked myself why these people were facing such poverty. I wanted to create an authentic portrayal, if that is at all possible, of the beggars, humanizing the suffering of these “others” through moral proximity (Orgad 2012). And yet, I worried that I was producing a touristic and fetishizing gaze, further “othering” this section of society. I also wondered whether my hybrid identity was Orientalising the begging (Yan and Santos, 297). Born and bred in diaspora, I have a hyphenated identity, or rather, set of identities: British-Asian, British-Pakistani, British-Muslim. I regard myself, therefore, as a postcolonial, diasporic filmmaker, and my film as it unfolds highlights many traits of films belonging to accented cinema often belonging to diasporic filmmakers who have a diasporic identity which brings to the fore a love for an existing homeland (Naficy 2001, 573).

As my diasporic identity came to the fore, and as my visit progressed, my perspective (Berger 2008) changed as I began to conduct my research in the field. It arose from a more profound relationship and I would be a little hesitant to say

that my entire perspective was that of a tourist. Lahore is the birthplace of my Father and my roots are therefore Punjabi. I grew up bi-lingual, speaking Punjabi to my parents and English at school and with my siblings. The Punjabi we speak has been referred to as a “pure” Punjabi and it was this initial linguistic connection that I noticed in my surroundings in Lahore.

The film contains a mixture of both objective and subjective views from either group. The interviews were edited as I designed a debate about the begging phenomenon and the complexities of the issue, bringing about another layer of power at play not only between myself and the audience as illuminated by other filmmakers but between myself and the interviewees. The documentary pans out as a subjective piece as it is my interpretation of the issue. The manner in which the documentary is edited passes an authoritative voice to the director, that is, myself, as I highlight the issues of begging through social, religious and political lenses.

The documentary aims to go beyond common constructions of begging, which is often portrayed in a negative light, by analysing the issue in greater depth, aesthetically and academically, to provide a multi-vocal documentary (heteroglossic visual text) that allows the viewers to see and evaluate the issue as it stands. I tried to do this as objectively as I could from the enunciated position I have as a British/Pakistani/Muslim. For me the voices of the beggars themselves were the most important but these had to be heard amongst all the other arguments that surrounded the issue of begging. The process of directing the film and bringing about the audio-visual authenticity of Punjabiness in the film, in effect, turned my role into that of an agent and to quote Naficy in a reference to diasporic filmmakers: “they act as agents not only of expression and defiance but also of assimilation, even legitimization, of their makers and their audiences.” Naficy goes on to say that cinema is one of the dialects of our language of cinema (Naficy 2001, 584). There was an added dilemma of spectators viewing this as if I was orientalising the issue as someone from the West. However, to counter this, I would argue that I assumed the right and responsibility to represent an issue that I was passionate about, which involved presenting the context in which this was taking place. This, in turn, required an insight into my cultural identity (Naficy 2001, 51). Stuart Hall nuances this as he writes,

Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write—the positions of enunciation. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say ‘in our own name,’ of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never

identical, never exactly in the same place. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim. (Hall 1993, 222)

The 'I' who writes here must also be thought of as, itself, "enunciated." We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific. What we say is always "in context," *positioned*. In the case of *Beggars of Lahore*, the film is produced by myself, a Western diasporic filmmaker.

Naficy analyses films produced by diasporic filmmakers by taking a stylistic approach and notes some common features, which comprise an "accented style" (Naficy 2001, 578). According to him,

The choice of style is governed by a number of reasons... availability of financial resources... and choices that individual filmmakers make as social and cinematic agents... The components of the accented style include the film's visual style; narrative structure; character and character development; subject matter, theme, and plot; structures of feeling of exile; filmmaker's biological and sociocultural location; and the film's mode of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. (Naficy 2001, 579)

Sadness, loneliness, and alienation are frequent themes in accented films, and sad, lonely, alienated people are favourite subjects; this would be true of *Beggars of Lahore* (Naficy 2001, 585). In addition, displacement is a feature, as is the Non-linear structure of the film. The film's protagonists, the beggars, are displaced people, as many of them had found themselves on the street; the film's structure is non-linear and has a pattern of juxtaposing shots of beggars with those of the other interviewees, interspersing multiple spaces, times, voices, narratives, and foci for a montage effect. According to Naficy, these could be propelled by the memory, nostalgic longing (Naficy 2001, 586).

Beggars of Lahore included a number of shots of Lahore, Pakistan, a place I regard as my homeland. These can be interpreted as "visual fetishes of homeland" (Naficy 2001, 583). Amongst these I also have focused upon what may be regarded as "visual markers of difference and belonging." These would include "posture, look, style of dress and behavior." In the footage throughout the documentary I have focused a great deal on capturing those in national dress, which in the Pakistani context would be the *shalwar kameez* for both males and

females. In one shot, which I will analyse below, when interviewing an elderly beggar who is seated on the floor, I pan the camera from his face down to show the national dress.

In building upon this Punjabi identity, starting from the visual shots of the homeland Lahore and capturing the Punjabiness through historical sights and landmarks such as the Badshahi mosque, Minar-e-Pakistan, the Qila, Ranjeet Singh's Muree and Lahorites dressed in the national *shalwar kameez*, I encapsulate at the same time the oral aspect of this Punjabi identity: the Punjabi dialect. The official languages of Pakistan are Urdu and English. The national language is Urdu. However, like many other countries, Pakistan has a number of other languages which include: Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Saraiki, Balochi, Dogri, Hindko, Kalasha to name but a few. It was the locals speaking a very pure version of Punjabi as I know it which formed for me a bond between the country and myself. Listening to the accents of people reminded me of how my Father used to speak. I am the youngest of five siblings and amongst us we speak English; my Punjabi with my Mother is fluent but with the odd English word. Part of my heritage is not only the national dress, which I enjoy wearing, but also being able to understand and speak Punjabi. An accented feature of *Beggars of Lahore* is the inclusion of spoken authentic Punjabi and Urdu (with subtitles), bringing about a greater level of engagement for the spectator as the viewer not only sees the visual content and hears it but also reads the screen literally.

Signature Beggar

The signature beggar who is seen on the front cover of the DVD, and who opens the film, is the still that I will be analysing. One day I was filming around a shrine called Pir Shah Wali in Lahore. The plan was to go inside the shrine, offer our respects, and work on the mise-en-scène for the later shots by getting a feel for the ambience around the Shrine. However, on seeing rows of beggars sitting outside the shrine, the latter was given precedence. The signature beggar struck my attention as he didn't actually look Pakistani, which again alludes to the theory of othering (Foucault 2006) and Orientalising (Said 2003) by a western filmmaker. The beggar had dreadlocks and his sense of dress was quite exotic for me as a foreigner, for he was wearing a *shalwar* and bangles in a very bohemian "*fakir*" manner. Given his striking appearance, the shot was a close-up, a high angle taken looking down at the beggar. Such filming would normally manipulate a shot so as to portray the subject as weak or submissive, however there are a

number of paradoxes present here. Firstly, though arguably filmmaker has power over the subject, in this case, I was actually intimidated and afraid of filming seated on the floor, as there were rows of beggars and this was the first time I was filming them. Secondly, the beggar does not come across as weak or submissive and is holding his ground. The situation is paradoxical, as I initially wanted to maintain some distance, but the camera forced me into moral proximity (Orgad 2012). I wanted to learn why this able-bodied man had ended up on the street; after explaining to him the purpose of the film and why I wanted to interview him, I asked my cousin to conduct the interview in a more provocative manner. The beggar was naturally very defensive in his answers, and this was something that I was eager to capture. When asked why he was begging, he responded, "Even if we're begging, it's not as if we're stealing or looting." This was a very powerful stance and also one that I whole-heartedly agreed with, and so I included this as the opening clip for the documentary. My cousin next went on to state that begging is prohibited; the beggar chose to ignore this and continued with his viewpoint of begging not being a crime.

As I have a sense of belonging when it comes to Lahore and indeed the country as a whole, I believe that if I am a part of this culture then I also have the right to speak and represent subjects within that society (Naficy 2001, 570). I also believe that as a result of my belonging and understanding of the culture, my representation is more authentic. I was, therefore, seeing the beggars from a "specific political and ideological context" (Favero 2007), and therefore using my agency as the director and narrator of the film to bring a voice to the beggars and empower them. I wished to illuminate audio-visually in an attempt to humanise the issue of begging which is often demonised. Emphasis on the self individualizing. The film is as a result, in Naficy's words, "politically engaged, critically aware, generically hybridized and artisanally produced" (Naficy 2001, 589).

Conclusion

Deconstructing my own work in an academic sense is a difficult task. Furthermore, begging is a very complex phenomenon and the attempt in this paper has been to critique my representation of begging in light of my diasporic cultural identity. *Beggars of Lahore* uses an expository mode of filmmaking. It could be argued that I am also seeing the beggars as "others" with a Western touristic gaze, which could be interpreted as fetishistic. The attempt was,

however, to bring about a heteroglossic visual text and produce a multi-vocal documentary. In doing so, I believe I am in fact subverting the “othering” of begging societies that society itself is creating on multiple levels. The documentary asks why people beg in Lahore and explores the regulation of begging through the voices of interviewees who had academic credentials within the remit of Lahore, and also those speaking through personal experience. These views were paired with contemporary images of beggars and begging in the Pakistani context, in an attempt to bring to the academic audience a very real and human yet complex issue. The film engages with the audience and informs them of the complexities of the issue, through information shared by the academics, politicians, and lay people, often supported or juxtaposed with the images so as to provoke and encourage further debate. The documentary takes the audience on a journey, providing them with information on the religious, legal, social and economic aspects of the topic along with introducing them to notions of power.

The film moves from highlighting begging as a social problem to showing it as a very real political issue. The image itself has been regarded by scholars as a political entity, and Nichols describes the documentary as the most explicit political form, which again adds to its appeal (Nichols 1991, 1). The term “politics of the image” refers to “the contestation and struggle over what is being represented in the media” (Jhally 1997, 2). Hall (1997) posits that images can have many different meanings (Jhally 1997, 18),

Ruby (1991) in “Speaking for, speaking about, speaking with, speaking alongside,” brings forth this dilemma in a very eloquent manner. Ruby raises questions of voice, authority and authorship and of sharing the power on a documentary platform (Ruby 1991, 51). In representing the beggars, I too found myself considering whether I was speaking for, speaking about, speaking with, or speaking alongside the beggars, and now with hindsight it seems I was doing all of the above. In essence a voice was given to those that were voiceless. In Jay Ruby’s words, by portraying this segment of society, I was in fact portraying “the political, social and economic realities of oppressed minorities” and the documentary in that sense was not only an art form but also a social service and a political act (Ruby 1991, 51) as it provided a heteroglossic text, multivocal documentary in nature with the aim of empowering the subjects (Ruby 1991, 56). It could be argued that there is a location of a new voice, a third voice which is an amalgam of the filmmaker’s voice and the voice of the subject “which is blended in such a manner as to make it impossible to discern which voice dominates the work” (Ruby 1991, 62).

Speaking to a cross section of people on a journey into the streets of Lahore was also a journey that reconnected me to my cultural roots. Speaking to people in my father's language, wearing the national dress, empathising with a section of the underprivileged, and capturing touristic sights was all part of the production of *Beggars of Lahore* but also the start of my own journey into my identity and Punjabi origins, as reflected and represented throughout the film. It is my specific enunciated diasporic identity that brings about a representation, which, although it can be argued is "othered" and perhaps orientalist, is something which I care about. What started off as a postgraduate research project has changed the direction of my career from law to academia, in which I continue to study begging in different geographical contexts. The film itself has been screened at a number of film festivals, both in the west (the U.S., U.K. and Europe) as well as in South Asia (India and Pakistan, including the home ground where it was shot in Lahore). For me, from both an academic and filmic perspective, creating an awareness of the issue was important; hence whether a person is in praise of it or is critical of the film, the fact that they are discussing the issue is for me a goal achieved. On the whole, over the decade it has been around the film has been well received, and audiences have acknowledged the enormity of the task of representing a hugely diverse and complex issue. The film has also been criticised by some for not having more of the voice of the beggars—this is because it was the start of the journey, and so the heteroglossic cacophony of polyphonic voices that frustrated me is what I represent to my audience. The film is the work of a diasporic filmmaker exploring an issue that is close to her heart in more ways than one.

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