

A Semiotic Analysis of Cultural Shift in Benazir Bhutto's Images

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Abstract

Cultural switching, or cultural shift, is a prevalent phenomenon observed among politicians. This study examines the cultural shift in Benazir Bhutto's life through the application of Charles Sanders Peirce's Triadic Model on the selected images. Generally, people perceive images tongueless that is a misperception. Images do have language that carries and conveys meaning either explicitly or implicitly. The study analyzes various phases of Bhutto's life, specifically her student life and her tenure as a politician, including her role as prime minister, offering semiotic meaning of the selected images to understand cultural dimensions of her life. Three images for analysis have been selected using purposive (judgmental) sampling. The data are organized chronologically to enhance clarity and assist the reader. A meticulous examination of the selected images has been performed regarding setting, background, dressing, colour, and props for image analysis. Images are analyzed qualitatively using a triadic model of semiotics. Semiotics, the study of signs, facilitated the decoding of hidden messages within the images. This paper clearly identifies the intensity of cultural shifts across various contexts. The research indicates that cultural shifts were driven by either political motivations or the pursuit of national integrity. The study presents several characteristics associated with Benazir Bhutto's personality, including her leadership qualities such as vocality, political acumen, and savviness.

Keywords: Semiotics, Culture, Cultural shift, Images, Politics

1. Introduction

Benazir Bhutto, a prominent figure in the realm of politics, served as the Prime Minister of Pakistan from 1988 to 1990 and again from 1993 to 1996, holding two non-consecutive terms. She garnered substantial

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media attention throughout her life. According to Zaidi (2008), she was the darling of the media during her lifetime. Suvorova (2015) describes Benazir Bhutto as a multidimensional figure. She holds a distinctive position in the political history of Pakistan. Her candidacy for the position of prime minister was met with controversy from political and religious factions due to her gender. Benazir Bhutto encountered ideological, religious, and administrative criticism. Historically, Muslim clergy have opposed women's political leadership and discouraged their participation in politics (Denoeux, 2002). Cultural switching or shifting is a common phenomenon among politicians. Yadav (2020) notes a cultural shift in the life of Sonia Gandhi, another female politician.

Rifkind (2011) argues that the cultural dressing of female politicians serves as a means of asserting power. The utilization of Punjabi, Sindhi, Balochi, and Pashto cards through language and attire is a significant aspect of politics, particularly in the Pakistani context. This study conducts a semiotic analysis of Benazir Bhutto's images to locate the cultural shift in her life. Images are favored over text in studies, as they are believed to represent reality more effectively than textual descriptions (Thorson & Mendelson, 2001).

2. Literature Review

The word 'semiotics' means "the science of signs" (Morris, 1938, pp. 1-2). This word has originated from the Greek word *sēmeiōtikos*. Locke (1700) for the first time used the term *sem(e)iotike* in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Semiotics deals with systematic study of signs, a newly emerging field in Linguistics. It camps under the shadow of Applied Linguistics which studies real life language related problems. Human beings are always eager to find meanings and reasons behind different things and create their own meaning.

Semiotics examines signs. According to Umberto Eco, "Semiotics concerns everything that can be deemed as sign" (Eco, 1976, p. 7). He coined the term *Unlimited Semiosis* suggesting that there can be various (as Pierce was well aware) interpretants (potentially) *ad infinitum*. Markus (1996) opines it contrasts between given signs and natural signs. They are distinguished according to whether the relation of dependence is between the sign and the object, or between the sign and the subject. Smoke is a sign of fire and depends upon fire since the latter causes it. Markus goes beyond Augustine, however, when he says that *signa data* depends upon

the will of the sign-giver for their significance. At least he goes beyond these early chapters of Book Two. Regarding the meaning of signs, semiotics and semantics are quite relevant. However, Sturrock (1986) is of the view that to focus on what words mean is semantics while semiotics is centred on how signs mean (p. 22). Van-Zoonen (1994) opines that semiotics has become a commonly used method in cultural forms used to deconstruct the meanings beyond the simple presence of women (p. 74). However, nowadays semiotics has more likely become an umbrella term to cover the whole discipline (Nöth, 1990, p. 14).

2.1 Culture and Semiotics

Ernest Cassirer (1923) regards sign systems as symbolic forms: culture is constituted by the symbolic forms of society. Culture is the subject of Semiotics and cultural semiotics is the sub-discipline of semiotics. Cassirer is of the opinion that it has two tasks:

- a) To study the systems of signs in a culture (in the sense of Herder or Tylor) with regard to their contribution to the culture.
- b) The investigation of cultures as sign schemata concerning the pros and cons which an individual encounters in intimacy to a particular culture.

Lotman (1990) states that if one assigns the sum of entire sign systems worldwide as the semiosphere, one can assume that cultural semiotics considers cultures as the components of the semiosphere (p. 80). In the late 1960s, partly as a result of the work of Roland Barthes, semiotics set out to become a principal approach to cultural studies. The translation of his famed essays into English in a compendium titled as *Mythologies* (Barthes 1957), came out in the 1970s. In 1964, Barthes promulgated that semiology targets to assimilate in any organization of signs, regardless of their content and boundaries; objects, musical sounds, images, gestures and the byzantine (convoluted) liaison of all of these, which form convention or public entertainment, the content of ritual: these constitute, at least signification systems, if not languages (Barthes 1967, p. 9). In Britain, espousal of semiotics was influenced by its projection in the study of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham even though the center was under the direction of Stuart Hall (director 1969-79), the neo-Marxist sociologist. In media and cultural studies (at least in its earlier, more structuralist form)

semiotics may not be fundamental now, yet it stays important for anybody in the domain to realize it.

Extensive research exists regarding images in the domain of Semiotics. Sharma (2007) narrates a news agency saying, Bhutto's pale skin, designer clothes and degrees from Harvard and Oxford seem to contradict her self-appointed role as the savior of Pakistan's poor and illiterate people particularly in Karachi's slums. Applying Charles Sander Peirce's model, Chang's (2008) study delineates Hillary Clinton in different poses, depicted differently in different attire during her campaign. Hillary Clinton dressed according to the situation during her whole canvass. Rifkind (2011) suggested that women politicians' dressing is meant for power. Young (2011) opined that Benazir Bhutto probably had to sacrifice her style to survive in culture. Danish (2011) in his research expounded the representation of Punjabi culture from different perspectives. Various studies (Qasim et al. 2016, Memon et al. 2014, Khuhro & Soomro 2013) have examined Benazir Bhutto from multiple perspectives. Nasir (2018) conducted semiotic analysis of gender discursive patterns in Pakistani television commercials. Semiotic analysis of the objectification of women in selected Pakistani advertisements has been engaged (Ahmed et al, 2020). Yadav (2020) explicates attacks on Sonia Gandhi by her political rivals concerning her Italian to Indian look. Ibrahim & Sulaiman (2020) observe that semiotic theory emphasizes communication as the creation of meaning, necessitating those messages be realized as signs for effective communication to occur. Consequently, semiotic analysis constitutes a scientific or analytical methodology for assessing signs, which serve as instruments for individuals to perceive their surrounding environment (Cahyani & Hasbi, 2024). The signs may manifest as sights, sounds, or text that communicate meaning from sender to recipient. Semiotics plays a crucial role in communicating the implicit meaning of a sign through language, music, or visuals. To the best of our knowledge, there is currently no research available on the images of Benazir Bhutto. This study analyzes her images to locate the cultural shift.

3. Methodology

3.1 Materials and Methods

The present qualitative investigation has engaged subjectivism as a research paradigm: reality is what we perceive to be real. Creswell and Creswell (2023) define qualitative research as a method for investigating

and comprehending the significance attributed by individuals or groups to social problems. This approach enables researchers to comprehend the significance of visual clues in the images. This research examines semiotic concepts and discerns patterns of meaning inherent in the images.

3.2 Population and Sample

Employing purposive or judgmental sampling three images have been selected from the websites of *indiatvnews* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. Creswell (2007) submits that in this sampling researcher collects sample material according to their knowledge and judgment. This type of sampling is helpful for researchers to impart an understanding of the research problem (p. 125).

3.3 Technique of Analysis

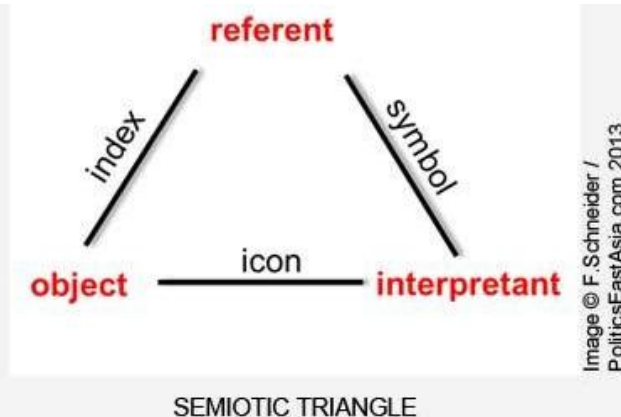
Semiotics is the methodological approach employed in this study. Chandler's (2001) semiotic analysis of the signs inside images has been used to address the research questions in this study. According to Rose (2001), semiotics provides an extensive range of analytical instruments to deconstruct an image and examine its function in wider systems of meaning (p. 69). The primary advantage of semiotics lies in its capacity as an advanced analytical instrument for elucidating the process by which signs convey meaning. Moreover, "semiotics has emerged as a prevalent approach in feminist media studies as it enables researchers to analyze meanings beyond the mere representation of women in cultural artifacts" (van-Zoonen, 1994, p. 74).

3.4 Analytical Framework

"In semiotics, there are two major models for the structure of a sign—the Saussurian model and the Peircean model" (van-Zoonen, 1994; Chandler, 2001). This paper examines the triadic model of Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce (1931) observes that our cognition is exclusively mediated through signs (p. 58). His model consists of the representamen, the interpretant, and the object. The mode employed by the sign is the representamen, similar to Saussure's signifier. The interpretant pertains to the manner of the perception of the sign in the interpreter's mind. Chandler (2001) corresponds it to Saussure's signified. The object represents what the sign denotes in objective reality. Peirce (1931) categorizes signs into three types: iconic signs, indexical signs, and symbolic signs. Dyer (1982) posits that in the iconic level, photographic images closely resemble the

represented object or individual, resulting in a similarity between the signifier and the signified. An example of an iconic sign is a portrait of a person representing the person being portrayed.

Charles Sander Peirce's Triadic Model



(Source: Google Images Retrieved December 23, 2024)

At the indexical stage signs give an extra meaning to what is obviously represented. Through causation or analogy, the relationship between the sign and what it is signifying is made; hence the relationship is not arbitrary between signifier and signified. People after seeing an Eiffel Tower postcard think about Paris: an indexical sign (Dyer, 1982; Rose, 2001).

The Triadic model of Charles Sander Peirce is used as it elaborates meaning in the images more vividly because of its three-dimensional interpretation unlike Saussure's dyadic model. By examining the setting, background, hair style, dressing, colors, gestures, postures, angles and props in different images of Benazir Bhutto, shifts of culture with the passage of time is closely estimated. The meanings of the colors in the images have been analyzed according to Olesen's (2013) interpretation.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction to Benazir Bhutto's Life

Benazir Bhutto was born on June 21, 1953, in Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan. She was the descendant of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who established the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 1967. A notable person in politics and media, she was the firstborn child of the former Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. After her primary school in Pakistan, she pursued

higher study in the United States of America. She attended Radcliffe College from 1969 to 1973. Subsequently, she gained entrance to Harvard University and obtained her degree in comparative government. She shifted to the United Kingdom following her Bachelor's degree, where she pursued international law and diplomacy at Oxford University from 1973 to 1977. She has been controversial publicly as the candidate for the first female premier in Pakistan's history. Her controversy stemmed from various factors, including her westernized background, religious and sectarian affiliations, and her gender. Literature on Benazir Bhutto is wavy i.e. hodgepodge of crests and troughs in different phases of her life. Renowned and dubbed as the 'Iron Lady of Pakistan' (Satyendra 1986), she was a social democrat (Bhargava 1990) with liberal political leanings (Bhatia 2008). She assumed leadership of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) following the ousting of her father's government due to a military coup. She garnered public trust and assumed the position of prime minister for the first time in 1988. She was the first woman to hold the office of Prime Minister in Pakistan's history. After her return to Pakistan in 2007 following an eight-year exile, she was tragically shot and murdered (martyred).

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4.2 Data Analysis Image 1



(Source: <http://www.indiatvnews.com/politics/national/rare-pics-of-benazir-bhutto-pakistan-s-most-glamorous-pm-11341.html> Retrieved December, 2024.

4.2.1 Background

The first image was captured in the 1970s when she was a party throwing student. The image's context and text suggest that she was likely enjoying leisure time with her colleagues. The image depicts a fusion of young naivety and sagacity.

4.2.2 Hair Style

The image clearly depicts her as an icon of western culture. Educated in the UK, Benazir was always at ease with the openness of western culture although she belonged to a Muslim country. Her unbound hair symbolizes her liberation from societal limitations. Moreover, the feminist movement was at its zenith, which may have significantly impacted her life. Her hair, from the scalp to the cheeks, is silky and smooth, and somewhat wavy and tangled, indicating her effortless, opulent lifestyle contrasting with her uneven and harsh future. The length of slightly tangled and wavy hair is long, but that of silky and straight hair is

short. This may signify a transient state of tranquility and happiness in her life, which is approaching its conclusion, as she is about to confront the harsh truths of existence, such as exile, tribulations, and assassination.

4.2.3 Dressing

Her checkered shirt may connote diversity in her character or several facets of her existence. The black color symbolizes the darker facets of her life or may signify the unavoidable realities she must confront in future. The black color also signifies her independence, will, and determination. The white lining of her shirt may signify positive experiences in her life, such as luxury and social gatherings, while also representing purity and innocence, indicating unawareness of harsher realities. Moreover, it represents foresight, optimism, receptiveness, and flexibility. The light grey or black hue may represent neutrality in life, to the point of being indifferent. The grey color signifies the preservation of the status quo, indicating a preference for a safe, secure, and balanced existence. A knot on her shirt may symbolize her bond with the Western society, ideals, and lifestyle. She faced severe criticism from her rivals in politics for her previous Western clothing and lifestyle throughout her campaign. Political adversaries tarnished her persona below the belt to obstruct her from becoming the first female Prime Minister in Pakistan's history.

4.2.4 Gestures and Postures

The gestures and postures of Benazir Bhutto exemplify a fusion of youthful innocence and savviness. The artlessness of her expression indicates that she is unaware of the real challenges of life and the visitations of several privations she is about to face. Her acumen in education, vocal prowess, and leadership capabilities have contributed to her distinction as the first Asian woman elected president of the student union at Oxford. Her posture seems serene and devoid of trivial anxiety as she relishes her role as the prime minister's daughter.

4.3. Analysis of Image 2



<https://www.smh.com.au/world/leader-in-the-fury-of-a-political-storm-20071229-gdruvu.html> Retrieved December, 2024

4.3.1 Setting

The image is set in Lahore, the epicenter of Pakistan. Upon her return from exile, an overwhelming crowd gathered at a rally to welcome Benazir Bhutto, the darling of the crowd.

4.3.2 Background

In 1984, Benazir Bhutto and Nusrat Bhutto moved to London to initiate their medical treatment and self-imposed exile. Benazir Bhutto initiated a campaign against the regime of Zia-ul-Haq following her recovery from serious ear infection. She became the leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) while in exile. Her efforts compelled Zia-ul-Haq to hold a referendum to validate the legitimacy of his regime. On April 10, 1986, Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan with unwavering conviction to initiate a statewide campaign for transparent and equitable elections. Pakistan People's Party supporters extended a historic welcome to their esteemed leader.

4.3.3 Dressing

She is attired in *shalwar* (loose trousers), as evidenced by the half-body image, along with a *qameez* (loose long shirt) complemented by a black gauze *dupatta* and a white shawl (head covering) adorned with white or silver lace borders. The white head covering features many flowers bordered by silver gauze. The most evident observation is that her body and head are covered up, in contrast to her earlier images. This image represents a substantial cultural transition from Western to Eastern aesthetics. Literature regarding Benazir Bhutto portrays her as a strong, capable, and professional lady.

Benazir Bhutto's attire clearly positions her as an emblem of Eastern femininity and culture. Her dress signifies that she is no more a free woman, rather constrained to adhere to the cultural limitations, conventions, and ideals to navigate Pakistani culture and politics. Furthermore, such apparel objectifies various cultures of Pakistan, necessitating the creation of mental space for individuals from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, in the male-dominated society, it was nearly difficult for a woman to attain a significant position unless she exhibited a cultural transition from Western to Eastern norms. Such attire may be regarded as a political necessity, or a result of the intense criticism she faced. Her freedom has been controlled by the context and circumstances in which she was to perform her role.

The white shawl covering her head signifies her identity as a Pakistani or Eastern woman. The white color of the shawl symbolizes chastity and virginity, and also suggesting the promising aspects that awaited her, including marriage, the death/martyrdom of General Zia-ul-Haq, and finally, the premiership. In Islam, the silver color (Chandi in Urdu) is associated with being soft-spoken, eloquent, fluent, and passionate. Her eloquence and fluency were vibrant elements of her demeanour, which many saw as a shield for her charming nature. Eloquence and fluency are suggested by the boundaries adorned with silver lace encircling her gauze *dupatta* and white shawl. Furthermore, the flower with four petals on the white shawl and its pattern signify her transformation into a pragmatic, prudent, and mature woman. Moreover, the flower symbolizes the happiness and pleasures she is poised to get in the imminent future.

The black color of the gauze and the gauze material in the *dupatta* is iconic, indicative, and representative of various facets associated with her life. The color black mostly symbolizes power, elegance, money, mystery, terror, malevolence, anonymity, sorrow, profundity, style, sadness, regret, wrath, subculture, technology, mourning, and death. A monumental assemblage signifies authority, welcoming their esteemed leader after exile, and indicates that, with the people's support, she will soon experience her perks of power. Furthermore, Benazir Bhutto's sophistication in political matters is well-known, and her life was characterized by considerable riches, as her family was among the prosperous landowners of their region. She had already experienced other gloomy and somber connotations associated with the black color, such as exile to London, the tragic demise of her brothers, the capital punishment of her father, illness in prison, and intermittent incarceration in other prisons. In a nutshell, the period of deprivation has concluded, and a historical and prosperous era is beginning. Furthermore, the transparency of the gauze *dupatta* signifies that her political journey is unequivocally evident, like public support, the martyrdom/demise of Zia-ul-Haq, and her rise to premiership.

It was challenging for her to confront a dictator who had inflicted significant harm on her family and life. Benazir Bhutto's *qameez*, characterized by its loose fit and loose sleeves, symbolizes her resolute and unwavering commitment to confront any situation regardless of the repercussions. Benazir Bhutto's arrival established a precedent for other women in a male-dominated culture. The *qameez* is black and white, featuring white floral patterns and designs printed on black fabric. Upon inspection, it is evident that the white color predominates over black on her *qameez*, signifying the conclusion of sadness and death, as well as gloomy and somber occurrences, and heralding her transition into an apparently joyous phase of life. The sleeves of her *qameez* are elongated, black, and open, symbolizing power, elegance, and authority. The black color signifies strength and authority. The openness of her sleeves signifies her readiness to confront any unfavourable outcomes in her mission with courage.

4.3.4 Hair Style

The color of Benazir Bhutto's hair in the image appears to be black, symbolizing youth. At that time, she was not married. The majority of her hair is concealed beneath a white shawl. Nevertheless, the exposed

sections of her hair lack the parting line or crease often maintained by women in our culture. Based on her exposed hair, we can deduce that her hairstyle still has a Western influence, covered by Eastern customs and values. We may see the covering of her hair with a sheet as a political costume intended to garner the approval of the crowd, as it is common for women in Pakistani society to cover their hair. This may also serve as an indicator of her maturity, forged in the furnace of harsh circumstances.

4.3.5 Props

Props are portable items utilized by performers in films or theatrical performances, such as sunglasses, watches, bracelets, bangles, and garlands. In the image, Benazir Bhutto is wearing sunglasses and has adorned her left hand with steel or iron bangles, known as kara. Kara is typically utilized as an adornment or jewelry primarily by married ladies and occasionally by unmarried women within the Shiite faith. In this illustration, Benazir Bhutto is depicted as unmarried. Thus, examining Benazir Bhutto's religious and sectarian allegiance allows us to elucidate the significance of wearing a kara (steel bracelet). Furthermore, the circle possesses an ancient symbolism utilized throughout several cultures to signify a connection that is without commencement or conclusion. It signifies unity, oneness, and an indissoluble connection with the Divine. Karas also symbolize a powerful protecting force that is beautiful, significant, and religious. In summary, the kara signifies a profound connection with God seeking and anticipating her ambitions.

4.3.6 Gestures and Postures

In the illustration, Benazir Bhutto stands as a leader exhibiting confidence, determination, and optimism. Benazir Bhutto's posture signifies her as an emblem of confidence, determination, and optimism. She is assured and self-reliant due to the extraordinary public response that has invigorated her struggle against dictatorship. She acknowledges the crowd's shouts and cheers by gesturing with a victory sign. She is determined and optimistic over the efficacy of her cause, as indicated by her uplifted hands forming victory signals. Her demeanor is cool and tranquil, reflecting her unwavering commitment to revitalizing her father's purpose.

4.4 Analysis of Image 3

The third image reveals a notable cultural transformation in her attire, as well as in her demeanor, gestures, and posture. The second image distinctly portrays her as an emblem of Semi-Eastern culture.



<https://www.indiatvnews.com/politics/national/rare-pics-of-benazir-bhutto-pakistan-s-most-glamorous-pm-11341.html> Retrieved December, 2024

4.4.1 Hair Style

Her hair remains unbound but still somewhat concealed. The transformation of culture is evident in the third image. The covering of hair is primarily attributed to cultural limitations and national or political objectives. Her hairstyle conforms to the contemporary vogue of that era. Benazir Bhutto's hair is styled and elevated, indicating the reclamation of authority formerly usurped by a military dictator over a decade earlier.

4.4.2 Dressing

Moreover, the white cotton silk sheet adorning her head, concealing her hair, serves as an indexical sign that she is constrained by society norms and must adhere to Pakistani or Eastern cultural

expectations in order to survive in the political landscape. The white sheet symbolizes purity in her life, as she was married in this image, reflecting the belief in Islam that life becomes pure after marriage, and signifies her insufficient understanding of political shenanigans. Moreover, it represents foresight, optimism, and receptiveness. Her clothing is maroon and red, featuring a pattern of maroon and red boxes that blend both colors. The color red symbolizes love, passion, enthusiasm, and vitality. The maroon color symbolizes sacrifice and bravery, accurately reflecting her life of suffering and sacrifice. She is now sufficiently courageous and, despite numerous hardships, is prepared to confront the circumstances. A button is seen on her dress at her neck instead of a knot as depicted in the first image, indicating a transition from Western to Eastern look. Antimony is commonly used by women as an eye cosmetic to preserve vision. Antimony in her eyes represents a sophisticated and empirical woman.

4.4.3 Props

A golden locket is visible around her neck, a customary adornment typically worn by newlywed ladies in Pakistani culture. The locket signifies a married woman. Gold symbolizes wealth and definitely illustrates her prosperous background. Additionally, golden earrings are prominently shown, typically worn by newlywed ladies in Pakistan.

4.4.4 Gestures and Postures or Body Language

Her countenance reflects her lack of familiarity with the political machinations as she assumes the office of Prime Minister of Pakistan for the first time. Nevertheless, she appears poised as the frontrunner in the polls following the marathon struggle. Furthermore, Benazir Bhutto seems to exhibit maturity following numerous trials and tribulations. She appears determined to continue her late father's purpose of providing sustenance, clothing, and shelter i.e. roti, kapra and makan. Moreover, she appears sufficiently savvy to navigate political matters, considering her previous adverse experiences

5. Conclusion

Semiotic analysis of Benazir Bhutto's images from different angles shows the fluctuation and transformation in the culture in different circumstances. The analysis of images revealed that cultural shift in politicians is quite a natural phenomenon. Multiple factors are located after the image analysis regarding cultural shift. Primarily, as mentioned

earlier, according to Rifkind (2011) women politicians' culture-dependent dressing is for power: political motivations dictate cultural switching to gain the sympathies of different ethnic entities residing in Pakistan. There has been irrevocable resistance to western culture and values in public and they would not endorse the western attire and attitude. Benazir Bhutto had to face severe character assassination in this regard.

Secondly, being a national leader, it was necessary to maintain unity and harmony among different ethnic groups (Punjabi, Sindhi, Balochi and Pashto etc.) residing in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto demonstrated political discernment in this regard by properly observing the cultural shift or switching at national and international forums (Gettyimages, 2021). Therefore, a slogan popularized at that time 'Charon Soobon Ke Zanjeer, Benazir Benazir' means Benazir is the source and symbol of unity among all the four provinces. She had political acumen that she illustrated aptly throughout her political career.

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