

Burka Avenger

Burka Avenger (Geo Tez, Karachi, Pakistan) is a 22-minute weekly program for 8-to-14-year-olds. It is Pakistan's first animated series, combining the Urdu language, fast-paced, 3D action, adventure, and comedy with a wide variety of original music. Jiya, a school teacher with an alter ego and a burka disguise, uses books and pens as she fights for justice, peace, and education for all (cf. illustration 1). Jiya narrates, introducing Halwa-pur, her city and her home. She was orphaned as a child and adopted by foster parents. She learned the art of fighting with books, pens, and acrobatics.

On the roof of a building Jiya is drilling in the art of *takht kabaddi*. She tries to catch an egg thrown a long distance by her mentor Kabadi Jaan, who tells Jiya about mental discipline (cf. illustration 2). Jiya is worried about Baba Bandook and his henchmen, but Kabadi Jaan tells Jiya she has strength, courage, character. With inner peace, there is no limit to what she can achieve. In the next scene, friends Immu, Ashu, and Mooli and their goat Golu are playing in the country (cf. illustration 3). Jiya arrives and tells the children there will be a concert at the girls' school today. Then the goat disappears. The children run after the goat into a dark forest and they see two bad men with a crow. The men are arguing over an explosive (cf. illustration 4). It blows up and when the dust settles, the children see the goat. They lead it away but the crow attacks from above; its cawing alerts the men. In the next scene, magician Baba Bandook is in the city and a car arrives (cf. illustration 5) with politician Vadero Pajero, who chastises Baba Bandook for not closing the girls school yet. He says the charity money will be for them and not the girls' school. The two evil men laugh. The children and goat are still cornered in the woods. The bad men vow to teach them a lesson and the ground shakes as one of them threatens, but then he is hit on the head with a book. It's Burka!

The theme song plays fast. She is up in a tree, leaping, sliding, and flying through the air. She conquers the bad guys, but the children think they saw a ghost. Meanwhile, Baba Bandook puts a padlock on the school gate, saying, "What will girls do with education?" The girl Ashu makes a plea to keep school open, saying, "Education is our right and we are the future of this country, the mothers of tomorrow." Bandook and his henchmen try to scare them all away. Breaking news appears on TV, then a commercial message with references to online resources, apps, and merchandise. The boy Mooli is disappointed there will be no concert at the girls' school. A song launches about hard times and sadness, and there is a dream sequence about the future without education (cf. illustration 6). Then, it's Burka again! She runs along telephone lines. In another fight scene, Burka wins and the school opens. The concert with Haroon takes place and he sings an inspirational song. In the forest, Baba Bandook and his evil gang are plotting their next scheme, determined to make the burka pay. *Burka Avenger* addresses the camera directly from her classroom with a message of empowerment promoting education (cf. illustration 7). The ending theme is a rap song: Don't mess with the lady in black! (cf. illustration 8)

Burka Avenger won the Gender Equity Prize and was a finalist in the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2014 in the 7-11 fiction category.

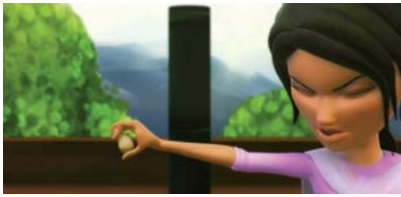
INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS' OPINION

International experts shared their opinions about *Burka Avenger* during the discussion sessions at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2014. The program generated many questions about the concept and its realization. They asked if the program is controversial and wondered about audience reception of the burka costume. Although some experts were concerned about product placement, others expressed admiration for its holistic approach to

Screenshots from *Burka Avenger* © Geo Tez



Ill. 1: *Burka Avenger* uses books and pens to promote education for all



III. 2: Young Jiya drills in acrobatic arts and learns to command her mind

a pro-social campaign.

“It must be a very brave program in Pakistan. Very controversial.” (male expert, Norway)

“It’s empowering and very dark and light. He wanted to showcase that just because you wear a burka doesn’t mean you should be afraid....I think that is a great thing for children and adults to learn about.” (female expert, Canada)



III. 3: Teacher Jiya’s students and their pet goat play together before school

“As a burka it is really, really valuable. It’s revolutionary in a way. She is so powerful. She is a revolutionary. As a concept I like it.” (female expert, Chile)

“It is really clever in two ways to use the burka. As a superhero in costume she fights for the burka and for the freedom for education too.” (male expert, Norway)

“Haroon is a really famous pop singer in Pakistan and he made this because he can. That’s why he hasn’t been arrested or attacked by the Taliban. This is really popular. Families sit down and watch and all the kids sing the songs and she has a different adventure each time.” (female expert, United Kingdom)

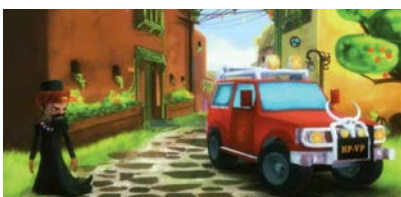


III. 4: Baba Bandook’s evil gang member holds an explosive

“This is one of the most interesting programs that we’ve seen in this category.... the product placement right in the middle of it—fantastic....That is the only way you’ll get these pro-social messages across. They have to infiltrate the culture.” (male expert, United Kingdom)

“The framing is beautiful.” (male expert, United Kingdom)

“Such an interesting program...but keeping social justice through violence can be very scary in a way....kids will love it, but there are so many layers.” (female expert, South Korea)



III. 5: A car arrives and Vadero Pajero tells Baba Bandook to close the girls’ school

“The political message is very clear, but it’s meant for children. Burka is a good character and well done in a simple way.” (female expert, Brazil)

“It’s a children’s program but it is done in a Mumbai film style. All these names have got some meaning. All these characters are like Mumbai characters.” (male expert, Bangladesh)

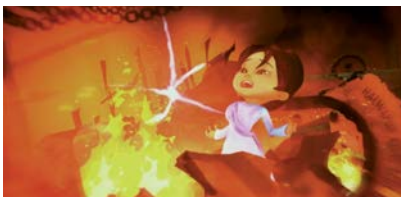
“This was such a big surprise. This was a great program. Peace and education for all.” (male expert, Netherlands)

With its female empowerment theme and inspirational music, this program greatly interested festival members. It sparked discussion about new possibilities and hope for the future of children’s television around the world. At the same time, some concerns have been raised as well; for example,

“When there are commercial breaks I am out of it.” (female expert, Germany)

“When these characters get famous event the costume gets famous. If children start wearing burkas in Pakistan it is a problem.” (male expert, Afghanistan)

“I didn’t understand why she was throwing the books? I thought she would



III. 6: A future without education

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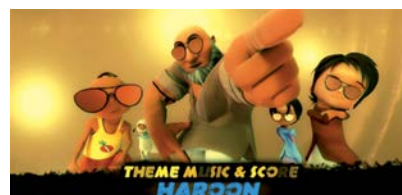


III. 7: Burka Avenger is a role model for girls

open it and read something powerful out of it.” (male expert, United States)

“The Burka Avenger leaves me with questions!” (female expert, Netherlands)

*Elizabeth Spezia, PhD student,
Southern Illinois University, USA*



III. 8: The program uses many styles of original music, including hip-hop

Target Audience 7.83	Idea 7.93	Script 6.33	Realization 6.91
Average Score per Category by experts' voters at PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2014			