

Portrayal of Women in Contemporary Pakistani Dramas

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Abstract

TV Dramas are the main source of entertainment in our society. It also depicts the cultural norms of the society. Particularly women's image in society is highly influenced by TV dramas therefore, it is important to study the relationship between television and women. The purpose of this research was to analyze the portrayal of women in current Pakistani Urdu drama. A quantitative content analysis technique was used to collect the data. A total of 21 drama serials broadcasted on four Pakistani entertainment channels (Geo Entertainment, ARY Digital, Hum TV and Green Entertainment) during 2023 in prime time 8 to 9 PM, from Monday to Sunday were analyzed. The unit of analysis for the study was female characters in these dramas. Data was coded in different categories according to the roles given to female characters. The framing theory approach was used in this research. It was observed that Geo and ARY were airing mostly stereotypical stories while Hum and Green were presenting a variety of topics in their dramas. Mostly, the women were given both negative and positive roles. The portrayal of women is relatively better than discussed in past. However, there is a need to write more stories discussing women's issues and promoting gender equality.

Keywords: *Feminism and Media, Portrayal of Women, Women Roles in Pakistani Dramas, Framing, Stereotyping*

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The importance and effects of TV dramas on our lives cannot be denied. Various researches have been conducted discussing the projection of women in different types of media. The relationship between media and women is critical because their image in society is proportionate to how they are being projected in media. Accordingly, TV drama is a powerful genre to influences people's minds and shapes their values (Ford, 1997). Pakistan is a patriarchal society. Women are still dominated by men though they are more than half of the population. Various stereotypes still exist

such as women being bound to homes and expected to be obedient to social norms. They are inferior and subordinate to men (Ashfaq & Shafiq 2018). Zia (2007) argued that the media has a biased approach against women in many ways which affects their image in society. Women are projected within the discourse of patriarchy and certain ideologies in mainstream media. Media can help in breaking the stereotypes regarding women which exist in the minds of people by adopting new trends in women's representation. Most media depict women as submissive. There are two types of media, one is news and the other is entertainment in which women are mostly given domestic roles or portrayed as objects (Kareem, Roshan, Qasim & Mehreen, 2021). Drama is an important genre of entertainment media. It shows the image and position of various social groups in different ways. It can explore human feelings and social problems.

PTV dramas play a vital role in creating awareness of various issues in society (Huma, 2015). Pakistani dramas are designed to entertain and educate the masses, addressing different social issues to spread positive change in society (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Earlier about twenty-five years ago, PTV was the only source of drama and entertainment. However, there are numerous private TV channels currently operational in the country like Geo Entertainment, ARY Digital, HUM TV etc. (Butt, Abbas, Ashiq & Sarfaraz 2021). Contemporary dramas mostly cover the issues that revolve around pre- and post-marital situations of women. Women in these dramas are portrayed as facing hardships and violence. (Huda & Ali, 2015). On the other side, some women are also portrayed as enjoying an elite lifestyle. Gender inequality issue is a serious issue in Pakistani society. The HDI, in terms of the Gender Inequality Index (GII), defines gender-based inequalities in three dimensions; reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity. Pakistan's GII value is very low, which is 0.567 ranking it 123 out of 148 countries in the world (UNDP, 2013). It depicts a high ratio of gender inequalities in different fields such as education, health, employment, decision making and family status. The government introduced Pakistan's National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (NPDEW) in 2002. This policy aimed at minimizing gender inequities in all spheres of life. This policy addresses health, education, access to justice, violence against women, waged work, economic empowerment, political empowerment and the role of media for women in the country.

1. Problem Statement

The critical approach of Hall (1997) explained that women's projection in media is not the mirror reality. It is the construction and re-construction of images and beliefs through language. This unfair treatment promotes patriarchy and dehumanization of women in the society. As previous studies have observed that women were presented in both submissive and independent roles in the past, now as the culture and trends of Pakistan are changing the media trend is also modifying. In the current study, the researchers analyzed how the new and free media represents women in different scenarios; positive or negative, domestic or professional, materialistic or simple and dominating or submissive.

2. Significance of Study

The goal of this research was to establish the current subject of dramas in Pakistan. The study tries to find out how Pakistani media depicts the role of women in society, either close to reality or the opposite. The researcher tried to analyze the media portrayal of women which creates obstacles for women in securing a better status in society.

3. Research Questions

The following are the research questions of the study:

RQ1: What are the subjects of contemporary Pakistani dramas?

RQ2: Which type of women characters are being shown in Pakistani dramas?

RQ3: Either Pakistani drama portray women in domestic or professional roles?

RQ4: Do Pakistani dramas show that women are materialistic or simple?

RQ5: Do Pakistani dramas show that women are submissive or dominating towards others?

RQ6: Whether and to what extent do Pakistani dramas help minimize gender inequality?

4. Review of Literature

Van Zoonen, (1994) discussed the second feminist movement that started in the 1960s in the US and also spread in Europe. This wave increased the interest of scholars in the relationship between media and gender. This wave raised questions such as the role of media in creating and increasing gender-based stereotypes and masculine values that distorted the image of women. This resulted in the emergence of a specific field of study focusing on stereotypes and social roles. The following literature review of this study is based on past research on women's portrayal in dramas. Ashfaq & Shafiq conducted research in 2018 to explore the stereotype concepts associated with good women and bad women. They revealed that stereotypes of “perfect women” projected in Pakistani dramas reinforce the patriarchal system. These dramas mostly portrayed lead women characters as younger, beautiful and slim, wearing simple dresses, sometimes less educated and humble. These women mostly belong to middle-class families with submissive attitudes. These women choose the profession only to support their families. While elite-class women are mostly projected as bold, outspoken, educated, career-oriented and highly modern. These characteristics highlight them as “imperfect women”.

Ashfaq & Shafiq further discussed Deaux and Lewi's Model established in 1984. This model explains the formation and representation of stereotypes regarding women in dramas. The model suggested four categories and these categories are still relevant to understand gender issues in media. These categories are physical appearance, behaviour, traits, and occupations. These four categories construct gender stereotypes regardless of men and women. TV fiction constructs the image of women as dependent, inferior as well as emotionally and economically weak (Ali & Khan 2012). Kareem, et al. (2021) quoted Heeter and Greenberg (1983) and Siu (1981) that most stereotypes are generalized negatively and can distort the image of any asocial group. People may believe that women are the same in real life as they are shown on TV. Women are not portrayed as active members in their domestic or social lives.

Tarar and Pulla (2014) argued that Pakistani women are still facing the consequences of the old feudal system. Though women in urban areas are in better positions having access to education and employment they are also categorized as “good women” and “bad women”. A good woman either educated or uneducated usually portrayed as generous, quiet, trustworthy, compromising, tolerant and hospitable. She must follow the decisions of her family regarding her marriage and always take care of her husband, children and other family members. She has to compromise her own opinions, sentiments and emotions. Conversely, “bad woman” is characterized as being selfish, noisy, impatient, untrustworthy, egotistic, authoritative, open-minded, liberal, modern, stubborn and inhospitable within the house focusing on her ambitions and career. This characterization of perfect and imperfect women does not only exist in Pakistani culture but is present in all patriarchal societies.

It is also observed that the media mostly focus on the physical appearance of women such as bodies and looks instead of their performances. This objectification of women to satisfy the desire of men promotes women's image based on their perfect body structure (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The portrayal of women in media as victims of violence is also an important dimension of media and gender studies. It was observed that women are also portrayed in both news and entertainment media as victims of harassment, rape, child marriages, violence and honour killings (Ahmed,

2014). It is very often exploited for the selfish ends of the media organization irrespective of the values and norms of the society (Akbar et al., 2012). Pakistani dramas mostly showed women as weak and oppressed members of society. This sensationalisation of women can damage their image and manipulate the audience's minds (Ibrahim, Amin & Rehman, 2019).

Tabassum, & Amin, (2020) in their study concluded that TV channels are also distorting Islamic values and encouraging divorce. Mostly women are portrayed negatively which is based on assumptions that can impact an audience's perception negatively. Iqbal and Abdar (2016) in their research investigated the issues of empowerment, decision-making power and career orientation of female characters. They analyzed eight dramas on Hum TV and observed that the educational qualifications and careers of 70 per cent of female characters were not discussed in these dramas. All female characters in these dramas were shown as lacking decision-making power and living intimidating life. With time, the approach of Pakistani dramas is shifting from traditional to liberal. 3 out of 4 dramas represented women as empowered, educated and aware of their rights (Jiwani, 2013; Khan & Zaheen, 2011).

The portrayal of women in media can influence women's perception in society. Women's portrayal in international media cannot be considered ideal. According to a report on media and gender in Pakistan, Pakistani media is still stereotypically portraying women and men are shown as aggressors. This type of women's projection endorses the concept of domestic violence. Thus Huda & Ali (2015) concluded that the way women are treated in dramas exposes them to sexual harassment. Mumtaz, Javed & Asif (2022) investigated the derogatory portrayal of female characters in Pakistani Urdu TV dramas through a comprehensive analysis of their storyline. Ten top-hit dramas were taken as samples. In these dramas, men treat women as their personal property. Abbas, Jabeen & Askari (2020) examined the normative model of the 'new woman' presented by (Dutoya 2018) from the perspective of gender, class, and culture. They examined Pakistani dramas and argued that in past, female characters were rarely depicted progressively in Pakistani dramas but currently more educated, independent, and urban middle-class women are being shown in lead roles. Abbas, Jabeen & Askari also debated on the construction of a Pakistani normative model of 'new womanhood'. It was observed that Dutoya's model of 'new woman' is applicable in contemporary Pakistani dramas. The idea of a 'new woman' is not a new phenomenon for Pakistani society. The Pakistani version of 'new woman' is the response to the feminism wave in the West, rigid religious norms at home and cultural conservatism in Pakistan.

5. Theoretical Framework

Manzoor, Jabeen & Hanif (2018) discussed Baron & Davis, (2003) that mainstreaming of a concept which occurred when similar content is presented on different channels. In this way, these messages become more influential and start controlling the minds of the masses. Resonance can be explained as when television depiction of reality is also observed or reinforced in everyday life. It works as a "double dose" to the audiences which increases cultivation effects (Baron & Davis, 2003). Reality is portrayed within a certain frame of reference in media. The framing technique allows the target audience to perceive reality in certain ways. The process of selecting certain frames and highlighting the media message in those specific frames of reference is called framing (Entman, 1993). Framing analysis helps researchers study the process through which realities take shape in a social structure (Shaw, 2013). To investigate Pakistani dramas, the researcher used the framing theory approach in this study.

6. Methodology

In the current study, the researcher used a quantitative content analysis technique to collect the data about the representation of female characters in dramas. To observe the women as lead and

supporting characters in dramas, four famous entertainment channels of Pakistan (Geo Entertainment, ARY Digital, Hum TV and Green Entertainment) were selected. A total of 21 drama serials broadcasted on these channels during 2023 in prime time 8 to 9 PM, from Monday to Sunday were selected by using purposive sampling. The list of selected dramas is as follows:

Sr. No	Drama Name/Channel	Day/ Duration	Episodes
1.	Ehram e Janoon, Geo	Monday-Tuesday (8 May - 25 Sep 2023)	42
2.	Mujhy Qabool Nahi, Geo	Wednesday-Thursday (12 Jul - 20 Dec 2023)	49
3.	Jannat Sy Aagy, Geo	Friday-Saturday (11 Aug - 18 Nov 2023)	30
4.	Mujhy Payar Hua Tha, ARY	Monday (12 Dec 2022 - 1 Aug 2023)	32
5.	Tere Bina Ma Nahi, ARY	Tuesday (27 Dec 2022 - 22 Aug 2023)	39
6.	Jasy Tumhari Marzi, ARY	Wednesday (23 Aug - 26 Dec 2023)	35
7.	Tery Ishq Ky Naam, ARY	Thursday-Friday (27 Apr - 12 Oct 2023)	34
8.	Kuch Ankahi, ARY	Saturday (7 Jan - 15 Jul 2023)	27
9.	Neem, Hum	Monday (5 Jun - 6 Nov 2023)	23
10.	Jhok Sarkar, Hum	Tuesday (6 Jun - 21 Nov 2023)	25
11.	Mery ban Jao, Hum	Wednesday (11 Jan - 30 Aug)	34
12.	Pyari Mona, Hum	Thursday (19 Jan - 6 Jul 2023)	24
13.	Mohabat Gum Shuda Meri, Hum	Friday (28 Apr - 28 Oct 2023)	26
14.	Fairy Tale, Hum	Saturday (5 Aug - 25 Nov 2023)	45
15.	Yunhi, Hum	Sunday (5 Feb - 1 Oct 2023)	34
16.	Tery Husan K Naam, Green	Monday (10 Jul - 19 Dec 2023)	26
17.	Kabli Pulao, Green	Tuesday (11 Jul - 21 Nov 2023)	19
18.	Jindo, Green	Wednesday (12 Jul - 3 Jan 2024)	26
19.	Nau Roz, Green	Thursday (13 Jul - 26 Oct 2023)	16
20.	Idiot, Green	Friday (14 Jul - 15 Dec 2023)	27

21.	22Qadam, Green	Sunday (16 Jul - 21 Jan 2024)	32
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The unit of analysis for the current study was female characters within the coded dramas. Those female characters that had some role in the story narration process were chosen as units of analysis. Female characters that had no direct or indirect linkage with the storytelling process were excluded from the research. Coding sheets were developed, and data was coded into different categories according to the roles given to female characters in these dramas. Some characteristics are relative concepts such as “good and bad” women that are rooted in the culture and understood according to its norms and traditions. That is why, under mentioned categories were operationalized and interpreted in the following context:

Protagonist or Antagonist: The protagonist is the main character in a story. An antagonist is a person who opposes or fights against the protagonist. The protagonist works toward the central goals of the story while the antagonist works against the goals.

Social Class: Either a female character belongs to an upper, middle, or lower socio-economic class of the society.

Domestic or Professional: If a character appears to stay at home, and takes care of her house, she would be considered as domestic. Unmarried girls who stay home with their parents are also included in this category. If a character works in any professional field or gets an education, she is considered as professional.

Humanize or Dehumanize: Humanize means civilized, educated, and enlightened (open-minded) women. Dehumanize means fragile, conservative and uneducated women.

Materialistic or Simple: Excessive desire to acquire money or possess things, she will be considered materialistic or otherwise.

Submissive or Dominating: If a female character is obedient to the male members of her family and does not question their authority, she will be considered as submissive. On the other side, a female character is dominating if she decides family matters, always talks opposite to the male character, yells at male members of her family, and argues for her opinion.

For coding purposes, the students of social sciences were requested to code the characters. Inter-coder reliability was checked to ensure that the tool was measuring what it was supposed to measure. A short story of drama was also written on a coding sheet which served as triangulation.

7. Delimitation

There are plenty of drama channels but the researchers delimited this study by collecting and analyzing data from 21 drama serials of four Pakistani TV channels. Those characters that had some role in the story narration process were chosen. Female characters that had no direct or indirect linkage with the storytelling process were excluded from the research.

8. Results and Analysis

After collecting coding sheets from coders, the sheets were observed repeatedly and the following was found significant:

8.1. Geo Entertainment

“Geo Entertainment” or Har Pal Geo is a Pakistani entertainment TV Channel started in 2002 and owned by Jang Media Group. 3 drama serials of Geo Entertainment aired from 8-9 PM between May to Dec 23 were analyzed. It was observed that 2 out of 3 dramas were based on stereotypical love stories or fallacies having no relation to everyday life. Protagonists in both these dramas “Ehram e Janoon” and “Jannat Sy Aagy” belonged to the upper class having a professional and simple lifestyle. While antagonists in both these dramas belonged to the middle or lower middle class having domestic, materialistic and dominating roles which portray the urge for wealth and

dominance in the middle or lower middle classes which may not be the case in reality. The drama serial “Jannat Sy Aagy” also discusses the issues of class difference where a girl from the lower middle-class copies a morning show host in all affairs of her life and wants to be like her. The story is based on fallacy and does not teach anything about real issues of life. In drama, serial “Mujhy Qabool Nahi” story starts with forced marriage and ends with domestic violence and the struggle of a woman. The protagonist in this drama belonged to the middle class, having professional simple and dominating behaviour. The story gives the impression that women from the middle class have to face such difficulties in life or forced marriages always end up in disaster. Women in all these dramas were shown as educated, enlightened and active aged between 25-30 years.

8.2.ARY Digital

ARY Digital is a Pakistani entertainment channel owned by ARY group. 5 drama serials of ARY Digital aired from 8-9 PM between Dec 22 to Dec 23 were analyzed. 3 out of 5 dramas were based on love stories. In the drama serial “Mujhy Payar Hua Tha” lead female role was portrayed as domestic, simple, and submissive looking as an object to whom the male protagonist and antagonist were trying to achieve. Drama serials “Tere Bina Ma Nahi” and “Tery Ishq K Naam” protagonists were professional, materialistic, and dominating. Antagonists in these stories were belonging to the upper class, having domestic, materialistic and dominating roles. The end of the drama “Tery Ishq K Naam” emphasized women's education and empowerment. Drama “Jaisy Aap Ke Marzi” and “Kuch Ankahhi” focused on forced marriages, domestic violence and women empowerment. Protagonists in these dramas were professional, simple, and submissive and belonged to the middle class struggling in their lives while antagonists were professional, materialistic and dominating which associated all such problems of life with the middle class. Most antagonists were also from in-laws. Though drama serial “Kuch Ankahhi” also emphasized on legal rights of women and promoted gender equality. Mostly women in all these dramas were shown as educated, enlightened and active aged between 20-30 years.

8.3.Hum TV

Hum TV is a Pakistani entertainment channel founded by Sultana Siddiqui and Duraid Qureshi. 7 drama serials of Hum TV aired from 8-9 PM between Jan to Nov 23 were analyzed. Topics of these dramas were education, social injustice, class difference, feudalism, cyberbullying, body shaming, social issues, religious issues, women empowerment, and a love story which means each story is different giving a variety of options to the audience. Most of the stories were without antagonists or antagonists with domestic, simple and dominating roles in a few dramas. Protagonists from the upper class were shown as simple and dominating. Protagonists from the middle or lower class were given both types of roles professional or domestic, simple or materialistic and submissive or dominating according to the story. In the drama serial “Pyari Mona” lead's mother was shown as the antagonist showing disagreement with her daughter in all affairs which is relatable in our society. The age of female characters was between 20-55 years.

8.4.Green Entertainment

Green Entertainment is a newly established Pakistani channel that started its transmission in Jul 2023. 6 drama serials of Green Entertainment aired from 8-9 PM between Jul 23 to Jan 24 were analyzed. Topics of these dramas were social injustice, feudalism, women empowerment, positive use of social media, self-discovery and other social issues besides love stories with powerful and lesson-oriented endings. In the majority of the dramas, there was no antagonist. The drama “22 Qadam” revolves around the story of a girl who wants to be a sports person while her mother is against her passion. “Drama Serial “Kaabli Pulao” discussed the issue of widow's marriage and

the difficulties faced in this matter which is also a very important social issue. The drama “Nau Roz” focused on the positive use of social media by a young girl. The drama “Idiot” discusses the issue of a boy who has some different ability than common people. Drama focused on the difficulties he faced and his journey of self-discovery and most importantly how his grandmother and another girl who later became his wife helped him in fighting these difficulties. Women's role in all these dramas was relatively strong making efforts to improve their own lives and life of people around them. Women of all age were shown in these dramas on Green Entertainment.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

While summarizing, it is said that stories of mostly Pakistani dramas revolve around positive or negative characters of women. Only a few stories were written without any female antagonist characters. Sometimes protagonists were shown as deprived and oppressed while antagonists were presented as the fortunate ones. It associates positivity with weakness or oppression. Such characters may induce feelings of sympathy in the story. However, contrary to the above, a growing trend of portraying upper-class women as protagonists against a middle-class antagonist was also observed. Sometimes women were projected as rude and immoral. Such a negative portrayal of women is destructive. Mostly materialistic characters were associated with negativity. It was also observed that sometimes close relatives of lead, particularly female characters were presented as antagonists while secondary relations were shown supportive. Such portrayal is not desirable for existing norms of an ideal family system in our society. However, women characters were not always presented stereotypically and balanced portrayals of negative and positive women characters were shown in dramas. In the majority of the dramas, domestic problems of women were shown whereas only a few dramas presented workplace problems of women. Hum TV and Green Entertainment particularly focused on women empowerment issues while opposing the stereotypical love stories.

Stories go away from reality when they ignore the cultural norms and values of society. Such stories have no positive impact on society. It is necessary to plot the story in such a way that people may get some positive lessons. The drama industry in Pakistan is flourishing day by day and increasing focus on emerging issues and trends of the society. Dramas play an important role in the lives of individuals and society. That's why there is a need to focus on contemporary issues and trends in dramas. Dramas should be more educational, informative, future-oriented and beneficial for women in improving their lives. This positive projection of women will be equally beneficial for women and society.

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