Representation of Gender Roles in Pakistani Television Dramas: A Critical Cultural Analysis of Stereotypes, Norms, and Social Influence

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines how Pakistani television dramas depict gender roles, supporting conventional cultural values by focusing almost entirely on women's stories around marriage. Though sometimes superficially shown as "empowered" female characters or "sensitive" male figures, the broader range of actual gender problems mostly goes unnoticed. Using content analysis of well-known shows broadcast between 2023 and 2024, this study calls attention to the structural constraints presents in media narratives and appraises their part in reinforcing a conservative cultural paradigm. Ultimately, the research contend that Pakistani TV drama provides only surface-level advancement and does not adequately mirror or underpin realistic gender transform.

Keywords: Gender Role, Television, Drama, Norms, Social Influences.

Introduction

The Pakistani dramas aired on different television channels became a potent cultural force shaping collective attitudes about gender roles and social expectations. These dramas are more than entertainment: they are a manifestation of the most pervasive social norms, revolving around what women and men should and should not be doing. This article empirically investigates how Pakistani television dramas construct gender(s) and reinforce and perpetuate cultural gender norms, by focusing primarily on women and frequently emphasizing the themes of marriage, family honor, and domesticity.

Although there are times when characters with even a hint of strength or independence are allowed to be presented as women in dramas, the overall intention seems to be conservative. A strong woman or women are usually shown only as good in so far as it may be appropriated by reference to family loyalty, or romantic victory even, hardly ever to public, political and professional realities. The broader realities of women's experience — in terms of education, career aspirations, social political action and leadership — are almost wholly discounted or sidelined.

Within a patriarchy, where didactic and patriarchally inclined traditions continue to influence the everyday life of people the narratives in television dramas play a major role in legitimizing existing gender relations. Through the glorification of marriage as every woman's sole purpose in life and emphasizing their dreams beyond the four walls of the home, the drama's citizens are indoctrinated into this patriarchal concept of womanhood. In this paper, we emphasize how, discuss how the media serves to maintain communal standards.

Literature Review:

Feminists studies have extensively criticized how South Asian media presents gender roles. According to Shaheed (2010), media functions as a "cultural institution of social control," setting women within boundaries of behaviour. Khan (2014) further contends that Pakistani dramas typically show women either as compliant daughters and wives or as morally tainted should they deviate from customary expectations. Zubair and Farooq (2018) show that although some more modern dramas introduce women who work or independent female characters, these people are usually "tamed" by marriage plots that confirm societal norms.

In 2021 Latif, Malik, and Nadeem found that Hum TV dramas notably influenced how college students viewed lifestyle, fashion, and spouse selection criteria, thus strongly affecting cultural norms via entertainment stories. Amin, Fatima, and Ali (2018) also found that dramas from private Pakistani channels (such as Geo TV, Hum TV, ARY Digital) not only entertain but actively promote varied lifestyles, including Western and Indian cultural parts, therefore transforming the expectations and values of viewers.

In their investigation of Contested Images of 'Perfect Women,' Ashfaq and Shafiq (2018) note that dramas promote a particular stereotype of a "perfect woman" young, beautiful, modest, home-bound, and submissive while showing educated, career-oriented women as morally suspect or "imperfect." This dichotomy supports patriarchal systems and restricts society's imagination about women's roles.

In 2023, Shabbir, Farooqui, and Shaikh investigated how media stereotypes especially in Pakistani dramas—affect gender roles as seen by college students. Their results show that constant exposure to gender-stereotyped images hinders the development of social identities, therefore particularly reinforcing backward ideas about the societal roles of women.

Dramas centering on social issues like harassment developed significant changes in women's attitudes, therefore reinforcing the argument that television can act as a catalyst for social awareness when important issues are addressed, as Qayyoum and Khan (2019) showed with examples such as Ruswai, Inka arru. Still, such socially progressive stories are seldom seen when contrasted with prevailing domestic and marriage-centered stories.

Looking at how television dramas affect university students, Iqbal, Hassan, and Irfan (2021) pointed out that while drama has the potential to raise awareness about women's empowerment, the lack of nuanced and varied portrayals sometimes restrict their revolutionary power. They stress that content creators must first and foremost change from biased and idealized representations of women.

Though modern shows like Sar-e-Rah introduce empowered female protagonists challenging social expectations, the vast majority, like Durr-e-Shehwar, continue to promote passive, family-centered women's roles, Tariq and Husnain (2025) found in their comparison of traditional and contemporary dramas. Women's empowerment is sent conflicting signals from this dualism.

Analyzing 21 prime-time Pakistani dramas using quantitative content analysis, Subhani, Khanum, and Hussain (2024) found that although newer channels (e.g., Green Entertainment) are starting to diversify female portrayals, mainstream stations like Geo and ARY keep promoting conventional images of women as either paragons of virtue or criminals. Their research supports their argument that women's presence in Pakistani shows still mostly entails cultural preservation rather than change.

However media narratives selectively moderate these shifts and often provide inaccurate or idealized versions of reality, international research by Hong and Cho (2012) reveal that the evolving roles of female leads often mirror more general societal changes. Chang and Bairner (2019)

also highlight how women in Taiwan juggle traditional and contemporary expectations, so revealing that obvious empowerment often conceals more basic social inequalities.

Aggregated, these studies demonstrate that even if media stories in Pakistan can suggest modernity or female empowerment, underlying structures mostly still reflect conventional patriarchal values. Although systemically gender inequalities are dismissed or ignored, dramas quite clearly reinforce traditional values based on family, marriage, modesty, and beauty; hence visible progress is typically only nominal.

The depiction of gender roles in South Asian media has been much condemned by feminist researchers. Media acts, according to Shaheed (2010), as a "cultural institution of social control," therefore restricting women within approved boundaries of behavior. Similarly, Khan (2014) contends that historically Pakistani dramas show women as disobedient daughters and wives or as morally questionable if they venture beyond conventional roles. Farooq and Zubair (2018) show that although some recent shows introduce working women or independent female characters, these characters are usually "tamed" by marriage plots that confirm societal norms.

Indicating a strong influence on cultural norms through entertainment narratives, Latif, Malik, and Nadeem (2021) found that Hum TV dramas significantly affected university students&' perceptions of lifestyle, fashion, and also spouse selection criteria. Amin, Fatima, and Ali (2018) also found similarly that dramas from private Pakistani channels (e. g., Geo TV, Hum TV, ARY Digital) not only entertain but also actively encourage different lifestyles including Western and Indian cultural components, therefore somewhat changing viewers' expectations and ideals.

Qayyoum and Khan (2019) further showed that plays centering on social problems such as harassment (e.g., French for-Inqaa) bring about substantial shifts in women's attitudes. Still, most shows are focused on marriage and domestic life; social-issue-driven dramas are exceptions rather than the rule.

Hong and Cho (2012) emphasized that the changing roles of female leads in TV shows mirror rising female social participation but warned that mass media frequently shows transformations selectively, therefore producing a media rather than completely accurate reality. Similarly, Chang and Bairner (2019) investigated how women in Taiwan negotiate opposing traditional and modern gender expectations via leisure pursuits such bell dancing, emphasizing that even obvious change frequently conceals deeper structural continuities.

Current research on policy orientation supports this view. Shoukat, Awan, and Qadeer (2025) demonstrated in their policy document Improving Women's Political Participation in Sindh how patriarchal customs, absence of institutional support, and cultural barriers combine to severely limit women's political activity. Their study highlights that political empowerment cannot really be promoted only by media representations, but rather they depend on deliberate policies.

Directly related work done in 2025 by Shoukat, Awan, and Jokhiyo showed a direct connection between female literacy and political participation, hence countryside women face significant educational and cultural barriers that cause political exclusion—a reality mostly unnoticed in popular plays.

Moreover, Shoukat and Awan (2025) in Empowering Women Leadership for Political Representation in Sindh stressed that women entering politics through quota schemes are restricted in their performance by social and patriarchal demands. Their research brought the need of mentor programs, leadership training, and systematic social transformation to propel actual empowerment beyond merely token political inclusion.

Their study Quota Laws for Women in Politics: Implications for Feminist Practice (2025) finally examines gender quotas, arguing that even if quotas raise women's presence in political fields, they do not immediately mean equality if not institutionally violent, backlash, and intersectional exclusions are also taken care of.

Collectively, these results confirm that, in line with normal values, underlying constructions usually still reflect conventional values even if media narratives might show modernity or empowerment; this is a pattern quite apparent in Pakistani television dramas.

Conceptual Framework on:
Two core theoretical viewpoints are employed in this research:

1. In feminist media theory, the way media perpetuates stereotypes and limits the range of female subjectivities by reinforcing gender inequalities is examined. This framework shows how Pakistani television dramas help to maintain patriarchal values by arranging women's lives around domesticity and marriage and ignoring more fundamental issues of agency, autonomy, and systemic inequality.

2. Albert Bandura believes in Social Learning Theory whereby people especially in the popular media observe and copy models to acquire behaviors and cultural norms. By always portraying marriage as the ultimate objective for women and emotional control or supremacy as vital male attributes, Pakistani dramas influence viewers' perceptions of gender norms; therefore fortifying traditional expectations and constraining possibilities for alternative gender expression.

Collectively, these models aid in organizing a study on the ways TV shows mirror and affect Pakistan gender norms.

Methodology
The study evaluated ten popular Pakistani dramas from 2023-2024, including "Meem Se Mohabbat," "Kabhi Main Kabhi Tum," "Ishq Murshid," "Tere Bin," "Mere Humsafar," "Khaie," "Jaan-e-Jahan," "Aye Ishq-e - Junoon," "Mann Jogi," and "Gentleman. "Using qualitative content analysis, each drama was judged on five criteria:

1. Main ideas and storytelling emphasis.
2. ambition and female character agency.
3. male character emotional spectrum and views of gender duties.
4. Dealing with social problems beyond marriage.
5. Emphasis and communication about gender norms will be addressed by this resolution.

Analysis and Discussion
Pakistani television plays a huge role in hegemonization of gender roles within society, but the stories seen on these kinds of dramas are completely boded towards conservative expectations specifically around women's identities.

Content analysis throws up two key themes are:0) No woman empowerment narratives0) No proper female role models to challenge the traditionalism emerging from the media. Our thematic observations highlight the persistence of patriarchal messages in Pakistani media that masquerades as an emotional story and sexuality-based empowerment.

1. Narratives of Marriage and Private Sphere
Marriage is the denial line for female characters in every drama discussed. The storyline of females, whether initially strong or only driven, is generally wrapped up complete within marriage or settling back to some domestic structure. Several dramas including Tere Bin, Mere Humsafar: Women who are given independence and freedom to end up by themselves justified romantically or familial. Visible to the eyeballs: higher education, career aspirations or political activism — all invisible.

The obsession with marriage closes off the very things' women have and what audiences are conditioned to believe as well (again predominantly young women — domestic contentment is the be-all end-all). Needless,

dramas that position the goal of a woman's life as synonymous with marriage help promote an ancient patriarchal belief of a woman's worth being dependent upon her relationships with men.

2. Representation of Political Empowerment in Media

A huge omission in all these dramas is the visible representation on screen of women in leadership, public service and activism roles — political participation is what it comes down to. Shoukat, Awan, and Qadeer (2025) have shown, via research (registration required), that the presence of women in political life is extremely important but even those who have shown this claim rarely depict female characters as agents of change.

Rather than allowing women their space in political/society offices they push them into the domestic space where may as well stay obliviate about being able to push for change in public politics or lessons to an institutional paradigm.

3. Role models: The straight vs inspiring

The role modeling of women in these dramas is thus highly problematic. Just like in Ashfaq & Shafiq (2018) study, television dramas present their ideal woman as modest, submissive and obedient, and mostly at the homebound. We almost always see women who want to be the biggest, the smartest, the coolest without it leading to their demonization (and often an unambiguously morally bad ending too).

When females are central to the plot, it is generally expected that they will fit into traditional family roles. Empowerment is depicted as patience and persistence while societal structures simply get pushed around; at best. There are no other life paths shown where the imagination is restricted and to women exercising public independence in the form and manner that independent-minded desires have to flee, even quietly chilly

4. Norms Reinforcement by means of Media Socialization

Bandura Social learning Theory Repeats portrayal like these socialize audiences into believing conservative gender roles to be the natural order, by means of repetition exposure. Ads that reward obedient, marriage-focused women with love and respect; and make ambitious, independent women either come undone (tragic fall-outs) or fall by the wayside make these patterns seem the norm to viewers.

The media becomes a reinforcing loop, with the traditional femininity endlessly reinforced and true empowering narratives written out.

Over time, this manifests as societal expectations, and it is more difficult for the average woman to envision herself as anything else than deepest domestic service.

5. False Empowerment: Cosmetic Change without Systemic Change

Some dramas try to feminize woman characters in more contemporary ways by giving them competent behavior inside a relationship or marriage but most of these are mere appearances. As empowerment is defined in anthropological terms as the ability to negotiate a degree of personal happiness within the confines of patriarchal structures and not challenging structural oppression.

Emotional strength in characters such as Jaan-e-Jahan or Ishq Murshid suggest that the only form of strength is when they go on to get married and prove true, not just pride on their emotional baggage or decision making.

We are not yet at true empowerment the economic independence, public leadership, activism and social reforms all are largely absent.

So, Pakistani dramas offer something like the false promise of progress without endangering austere power structures. They celebrate isolated tales of triumph without proposing any radical societal shifts, so as to keep up an traditional gender order.

6. Design Over-the-Top Gender Reality:

Urgent gender issues—sexual harassment, mental health, reproductive rights, economic disparity, political participation, and educational obstacle—are almost totally absent. Marriage not institutional justice or empowerment solves issues like sexual harassment (e. "Love is the Junoon is singuryam"). Compound facts, rare if ever, are these domestic abuse outside of the framework of mother-in-law conflicts, child marriage, and honor-based violence thought.

7. Recognition of traditional values:

Notwithstanding some cosmetic improvement, the larger thematic landscape stays conventional. Good ladies are devoted to household dignity, sacrificing, and patient. Bad women are opinionated, driven, or sexually independent. Still providers and guardians, men are still there even emotional. Good marriages, not individual satisfaction, will determine the future of daughters. In this way, dramas perpetuate societal gender, family, and honor hierarchies.

8. The Myth of Progress:

The limited evolution in gender portrayals functions as a myth of progress. By introducing slightly more emotionally intelligent male characters or slightly more assertive female characters, dramas create the illusion of gender progressivism while fundamentally maintaining the same conservative gender contracts. In doing so, they deflect deeper critiques and contribute to the endurance of patriarchal values under the guise of modernity.

Comparative Table Summary:

Drama	Female Portrayal	Male Portrayal	Broader Social Issues	Patriarchal Norms Outcome
Meem Se Mohabbat	Traditional	Traditional	No	Reinforced
Kabhi Main Kabhi Tum	Assertive (Marriage-focused)	Emotional, Supportive	No	Reinforced
Ishq Murshid	Semi-assertive (Love-focused)	Emotional	No	Mixed
Tere Bin	Initially assertive, subdued	Feudal, Dominant	No	Reinforced
Mere Humsafar	Passive, Sacrificial	Emotional, Protector	No	Reinforced
Khaie	Avenging victim (Exception)	Patriarchal, Violent	Yes (Limited)	Challenged Partially
Jaan-e-Jahan	Assertive (Marriage-focused)	Meek, Respectful	No	Mixed
Aye Ishq-e-Junoon	Victim-turned-spouse	Supportive Hero	Sexual Harassment (Marriage solution)	Mixed
Mann Jogi	Defiant victim (Marriage-focused)	Emotional, Respectful	Religious Patriarchy	Challenged
Gentleman	Independent, Career-oriented	Reformed Gangster	Crime, Journalism (light)	Mixed

Suggestions

Considering the foregoing examination of gender representations in Pakistani television dramas, the following recommendations are made for a more gender-inclusive progressive media landscape:

1. The Women's Narrative needs to Diversity beyond Marriage

Instead, writers and producers should write storylines demonstrating ambitious women taking on jobs as scientists, lawyers, teachers, business administrators or political leaders. It should not be allowed to create false impression there is no end to success and joy except marriage for female characters.

2. Emphasize On the Involvement and Representation(s) of Women in Politics

Governance – it is important for the TV dramas to present women as actively involved in governance, social advocacy and community leadership. Improved common

acceptance of women in decision making positions: In support of larger gender equality movements, the presence of public role models of women in public life can make society more resilient toward women.

3. Accurate Female Role Models are in Need

Only (as protagonists are satisfying agency, ambition, resilience and social activism, not just patience and sacrifice). Realistic yet powerful images for female audiences need that role models are full blown —black, multi-dimensional married to 1 or two and to other honest life commitment.

4. Cross into Mainstream Storylines and Address Social Justice

And instead of in a specialized drama, impacting issues such as harassment, unequal education or political disenfranchisement on a small scale; bigger more normalized serials should tackle them. To shift the conversation on women, mental health, and power to economic autonomy activism are long-term we must normalize it.

5. Tackle Stereotypes Using Multifaceted Characters

Stereotypes should be challenged and tackled head on with the use of diverse and multi layered characters. Like their male counterparts, women are not to be simplified into good or bad modern women tropes. Having intricate, multi-dimensional females that can make mistakes and learn from them will reflect and showcase suffragette stereotypes better etched in contemporary reality.

6. Teach Staff and Faculty on the Concepts of Gender Facets Policies

Changeable narrative policies should be implemented at the core of the media industry so that producers, writers, and directors are trained on gender-sensitive approaches to storytelling. Gender sensitivity, and its scope in the realm of media, has been poorly researched. Having defined policies would create a structure to better build transforming content.

7. Encourage Partnerships Between Academia and Media

Instead of being product driven, media agencies work together with scholars and researchers in Gender Studies to analyse how portrayals and images shape society's view to deep multicultural understanding. Storytelling through research will create, vulnerable, tender, sensitive but resistant fabrics out of violent stereotypes.

Conclusion

For the most part, Pakistani TV series do little to show truly progressive gender role division. Tethering women's identities and goals almost only to marriage helps to preserve conservative cultural narratives even when presenting them in modern aesthetics. The obvious gap in real-world issues affecting gender equality is not compensated for by emotional sensitivity among male characters or superficial assertiveness among female characters.

What is most needed is narrative that strays from the marriage-obsessed structure and addresses more widespread issues of systemic inequality, economic empowerment, political representation, and social justice. Until then, Pakistani television dramas will carry on showing and bolster the very patriarchal system they sometimes claim to challenge.

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