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Negotiating Female Empowerment and Patriarchal Stereotypes in Contemporary Pakistani Television Dramas: A Critical Media Analysis

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Abstract

Popular TV serials play an important part in establishing the notions about the role of women, social morality, and cultural identity of the audience in the contemporary Pakistan. Many narratives still continue to uphold the gender norms of the society and traditional gender roles while other dramas are also starting to reflect women as educated and professionally driven, and independent in society. The current discussion is a critical analysis of the imagery of women in the modern-day Pakistani TV serials, which have been analyzed on two conflicting perspectives of female empowerment and patriarchal stereotyping. The research is based on a theoretical framework that combines feminist media theory, representation theory, and critical cultural analysis, which examines how the TV storylines create and reflect dominant socio-cultural structures of Pakistan society. The study draws on feminist media theory, representation theory and critical cultural analysis to analyze the TV narratives and how they contest and reinforce dominant socio-cultural structures in Pakistani society. The paper reviews some of the dramas produced in the recent times in various entertainment channels of the media and highlights the themes of home, honor, marriage, woman empowerment, economic freedom and moral policing. It also examines the commercial rationality of television production, such as TRP-based stories and audience's expectations, that can sustain stereotypical representations of women. Furthermore, this study explores the present contribution of digital audiences and social media

discourse to the construction of interpretations for female characters and gender narratives. The research suggests that although Pakistani dramas have slowly introduced characters who are more empowered and independent in their own roles, empowerment is often seen in culturally acceptable and more patriarchal boundaries. As a result, the TV dramas are places of ideological conflict, where progressive gender discourses meet with conservative social values. The paper argues that the contemporary Pakistani television dramas have evolved and represent a gender politics that is at the same time conflicted and that show greater support of modernity and tradition in Pakistan as a society.

This paper aims to explore the depiction of women in the Pakistani television dramas focusing on the transformative power of women in front of the camera as actors and behind the scenes as directors, producers and scriptwriters, and how these roles challenge the established patriarchal stereotypes. It uses the theoretical points of feminist media theory, media discourse and cultural narratives as tools to analyze the roles of women in the Pakistani Television dramas. The study will reveal the patriarchal bias in the Pakistani society as certified by the roles of women in Pakistani television dramas

Keywords: *Pakistani television dramas; female empowerment; patriarchal stereotypes; gender representation; feminist media theory; media discourse; cultural narratives; women in media; Pakistani society; television studies*

Introduction

The drama series on television can still be considered as one of the most powerful sources of mass media in Pakistan as it passes more than one interesting fact not only as a source of entertainment but also that it is a strong cultural institution that influences the way people think, how they walk around and their collective understanding of gender roles. In Pakistan TV serials are widely seen across the nation, especially on the main entertainment channels which has the power to shape perception of family norms, morality, femininity and social identity at the domestic and transnational level. In this wider media discourse, one of the topics that has been most talked about and scrutinized regarding Pakistani television culture is the depiction of women (Shabbir et al., 2021).

Representations of women in Pakistani dramas are a phenomenon that mirrors the complex interplay of modernity, religion, patriarchy, interests of commercial media and changing socio-cultural expectations. Previously, when women's role in Pakistani television stories were discussed, they were typically presented as dutiful daughters, helpless wives, sensitive mothers, or virtuous women having a secondary identity of father and mother in the home (Baloch et al., 2025). These roles often perpetuated patriarchal social systems, which accepted that women were dependent on men, they were the emotional ones and that women and men would have their own roles. In recent years, however, female characters in Pakistani dramas tend to be androgyn and they are neither educated nor economically independent, professionally ambitious nor socially assertive but most of all they challenge the traditional power structure and demand more autonomy for themselves (A. Tariq & Husnain, 2025).

While these are steps forward, it is important to acknowledge that the empowerment stories told in many of today's dramas are still very limited in scope by the cultural expectations of a patriarchal society. Gendered portraits of female characters who seek independence or defy traditional gender norms are often depicted as being morally condemned, socially punished,

emotionally hurt, or even "corrected" by the narrative inside the narrative (Zaheer, 2020a). As a result, the woman typology is sometimes contradictory in television dramas, with empowerment conveyed on its surface and then being disciplined within a cultural framework that defines "femininity" and "respectability. That leaves a contradictory representational texture for television dramas on which women are empowered, but also disciplined within a cultural framework that defines what women are and respectability. This tension is indicative of the wider ideological conflict in the Pakistani society between traditional gender order and newly circulating discourses about women's rights, gender equality and modernization of society.

Moreover, women's role representation in TV dramas is further complicated by the commercialization of the electronic media. Because of competition for television ratings, advertising dollars and digital engagement, dramatized story-telling that focuses on domestic-related conflict, toxic relationships, emotional victimization, gendered sensationalism, and the like has been promoted (HASSAN, n.d.). This representation tends to confine women to stereotypical roles and message of sacrifice or victimization, limiting the diversity and realism of women's experiences. At the same time, the digital landscape has revolutionized audience engagement by giving viewers the power to openly critique, interpret, and discuss the representations of gender in TV stories (Arif et al., 2025a). Reception of audiences has thus become an important aspect to examine in the context of the impact of media frames on the social attitudes about women and gender relations in Pakistan.

In this study, an appraising analysis of the portrayal of women in the current Pakistani television dramas using two conflicting models of representation namely female empowerment and patriarchal stereotyping has been conducted. The paper has adopted a feminist approach through the lenses of feminist media theory and critical cultural analysis to examine the representation of women agency, social mobility, household roles and moral identity within the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. The research aims to investigate the extent to which contemporary dramas really challenge patriarchy or simply re-create it in modern and marketable genres. Moreover, the role of media in shaping gender ideologies and public discourse on women role in the modern Pakistani society is explored.

Theoretical Framework

For a long time, women have been a major focus area in feminist research, cultural studies and communications theory. As cultural artifacts, television dramas are not only meaningful representations of the dominant social values but are also actively involved in creating meaning regarding gender, identity, morality, and power relations. In discussing the role of women in Pakistani television dramas, it is important to note that this role is not simply a reflection of the fictional narrative, but rather a reflection of a larger process of socialization, negotiation, and even challenge of the social norms and the patriarchal structure. Thus, feminist media theory, representation theory, and critical cultural analysis are the main theoretical tools used in this study to critically analyze the rival discourses of empowerment of female subjects and patriarchal stereotyping in the Pakistani dramas today.

The key theoretical lens for the analysis of the representation of women in media institutions and media narratives is the feminist media theory. Media, as a vector of information, takes part in the patriarchy through the different ways it represents women's experiences and agency, a theme promoted by feminist scholars (Santos et al., 2022). Media images frequently create a

fantasy of femininity that is understood as being subservient, attractive, selfless, needy, and homemaking. Such depictions help to normalize the gender hierarchy, as the gender roles are socially constructed, deemed as natural and culturally desirable. In Pakistan, these are often found in the idealization of the submissive role of women, policing of women's autonomy, and the romanticization of women's suffering in the context of family (Habib & Anwar, 2025).

Concurrently, current feminist debates in the media are aware that the media is not an impenetrable whole or a monolith. Television dramas can also serve as a locus of resistance where women defy patriarchy by being educated, professional successes, being emotionally independent and social active (Kay, 2020). The recent Pakistani dramatic trends have been marked by the presence of more and more female actors as the plot heroine who follows a career, fights forced marriage, stands against domestic abuse and challenges the traditional female's role. Feminist scholars warn, however, that such images are frequently "negotiated empowerment:" women are given agency within culturally acceptable bounds that do not question the stability of the male dominated order (Widanti, 2023). Thus, empowerment is often intertwined with traditional values and norms of modesty, family respect and wife resilience in dramas broadcasting in Pakistan.

The study also applies Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which explains the role and function of media in creating social meaning through language, symbols and cultural discourse (Asmar et al., 2023). Hall's ideology of representation, in turn, involves a process whereby a certain kind of identity and social role is normal, whereas another is marginalized or problematized. In the Pakistani dramas, women were also stereotyped as "ideal women" and "immoral women", which led to a moral implication on women's actions, sexuality and being independent. Positive portrayal of women who conform to the traditional values of family while negative portrayal of women who are assertive or not mainstream are very common (Adil & Malik, 2021). These representational patterns help to construct thoughts about acceptable femininity in Pakistani society.

Critical cultural analysis also helps to analyze the working of the dramas on television in relation to the wider socio-economic and political contexts. The commercial pressures, ratings, preference of advertisers and cultural conservatism are all powerful drivers in the Pakistani media industries (Iftikhar & Aamir, 2025). Schooling television producers are, therefore, frequently creating narratives that appeal to the contemporary urban viewer as well as not directly challenging the prevailing patriarchal and religious values. This is a commercial balancing act, a hybridity whereby the progressive theme of women's empowerment has to be present in the mix of traditional gender stereotypes and kept in place for wider audience acceptance.

Also, with the advent of digital media networks, the interaction between audiences and TV programs has changed. Today, audiences are seeing themselves engaged in the interpretation, criticism and re-construction of media discourses through social media conversations, online reviews, memes, and digital activism. As such, audience reception theory will be relevant to understanding how there are views and interpretations of what the audience creates when they view dramas involving female actors. These are times at which contemporary audience, specifically younger urban viewers, increasingly challenge misogynist portrayal and require more female based stories, and this influences future trends in media production.

Such theoretical interweaving allows us to examine critically the role of modern Pakistani television dramas in fostering a change in the gender. These integrated theories enable us to assess whether these modern Pakistani dramas are actually successful in bringing about a change in the gender or are simply enacting patriarchy in modern form. The theoretical framework serves as an analytical lens to appreciate the complex and contradictory nature of the images of women being represented in the media and their implications on the discourse of gender in Pakistani society.

Evolution of Women's Representation in Pakistani Television Dramas

In Pakistani TV dramas, portrayal of women has been changing a lot in the past few decades and has grown as the result of the transformation of the Pakistan society in socio-political, cultural, and economic aspects. The role of women in television narratives has undergone constant changes throughout the history of state-controlled radio and television broadcasting and today's commercialized entertainment media and digital streaming platforms, from progressive reformist ideals to traditional patriarchal expectations. This historical trajectory of Pakistani dramas thus offers valuable understanding regarding creation and reconstruction of gendered identities by media institutions amidst the changing cultural realities.

When Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) was initially established in 1960s and the 1980s, the dramas broadcasted by the state television network were considered to be high culture in nature and socially responsible. Most dramas of this period had shown the women as educated, moral, and resilient in the face of issues like class inequality, forced marriage, dowry, oppression at home and women's access to education (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Female characters, who were intellectually independent, emotionally complex, and socially active, were introduced by the writers like Ashfaq Ahmed, Bano Qudsia and Haseena Moin. Specifically, Haseena Moin's dramas challenged the conventional gender stereotypes and depicted confident and outspoken women actively involved in their professional and public life (Wolinetz et al., 2020).

But the ideology of Islamic movement given during military regime of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in the 80's drastically changed the mindset of electronic media of Pakistan. The portrayal of conservative religious and patriarchal values on TV increased, and was centered on female modesty, domesticity, and obedience (Shah, 2022). Women were increasingly excluded and there were tighter restrictions on women's portrayal of their appearance, interaction and actions in films. In contrast, female characters were often depicted in idealized roles at home, emphasizing traditional family dynamics and male authority. Media academics contend that an institutionalization of a feminist model that is neutered, moralistic and submissive was institutionalized during that era (Hayat, 2023).

Another significant milestone in women representation was the liberalization of the Pakistani media in early 2000s. Entering of private TV networks like Geo Entertainment, ARY Digital and HUM TV further plugged the entertainment sector with increased competition and diversification of TV content (Abbas & Sulehria, 2021). New dramas started to feature themes of women's education, their career goals, domestic violence, divorce, marital abuse, psycho trauma, and female resistance against the oppression of the patriarchal system. Women characters became more common in the roles of lawyers, journalists, doctors, entrepreneurs, policemen and socially independent people facing complex social problems (Tabassum & Amin,

2020). This shift was a sign of the increasing visibility of women in the middle class in Pakistan and evolving discourses on gender rights and empowerment in the public sphere.

However, these forward-thinking changes leave behind a legacy of many patriarchal stereotypes and problematic gender narratives in modern Pakistani dramas. The limited discourses on women's dress and decorum in 19th-century illustrated gazettes are often given in a dichotomous way, that is, in terms of the "ideal woman" and the "rebellious woman" (Hassan & Siddique, 2025). In dramas showing powerful female figures, empowerment can come with demands of upholding family's honor; sacrificing feelings, emotions and morals; and conforming to moral standards. Moreover, based on the TRPs and audience consumption behaviors, stories featuring toxic relationships, family intrigues, female rivalry and victimization remain profitable. Even with the advent of digital media in Pakistan, the perception of women has drastically changed in Pakistani dramas. The way gender is represented has been brought into the public eye and audience involvement is increased through online streaming platforms and through social media discussions. Today, audiences challenge the ideas of victim blaming, regressive depictions of women in media and other forms of digital activism and discussions openly (Arif et al., 2025b). In the process, television producers make a concerted effort to combine the traditional with the new, the patriarchal with the feminist to attract all kinds of viewers, especially the younger urbanites.

The aforementioned historical development illustrates that the women's presence in Pakistani TV dramas is still an issue of contention and has a great deal of ideologies. Media discourses have slowly begun to center on issues of empowerment and social independence for women, but notions of patriarchy still set limitations on how women can exercise agency. It is therefore evident that contemporary Pakistani dramas are constantly engaged in a dialogue between tradition and modernity, conservatism and liberalism, as well as patriarchal domination and autonomy of women.

Female Empowerment Narratives in Contemporary Pakistani Dramas

Woman empowerment, social mobility, and self-determination themes have become common themes in Pakistani dramas in recent years. While previous dramas featured almost entirely female characters with limited and subservient roles, recent ones feature female protagonists who work in an office or seek higher education or assert themselves as individuals in private and public life, and who break away from the confines of traditional and subordinate roles. The shifting portrayals are indicative of the social changes taking place in Pakistan such as urbanization, growing number of women pursuing higher education and employment, digital activism and the growing debates over gender equality and women's rights (Biswas, 2024).

A major thing that has come to the fore in the context of empowerment is educated and professionally successful women in Pakistani dramas. In recent times, female roles have been adopted in various professions such as doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers, entrepreneurs, and civil servants, who are actively participating in the society and enjoying their independence in terms of economy (Naeem et al., 2021). Such representations problematize the stereotypical view of women's role as a mere homemaker and being dependent on close relatives of the male gender. Increasingly, dramas highlight women's competence, intelligence and their ability to navigate their way through social and institutional barriers. This transition is especially important

in a culture where women have traditionally faced limitations on their professional engagement due to gendered norms and inequities.

Contemporary dramas, too, have grown more open to tackling highly charged social themes that impact on women such as domestic violence, emotional abuse, forced marriage, workplace harassment, mental health and the lack of female agency. The dramas on TV try to generate an awareness about gender injustice and motivate the public to have a discussion about legal and social rights of women (N. Khan, 2021). Recent productions have included several that depict women in situations where they are in abusive relationships, wanting to divorce, appealing to the law, or wanting to ignore decisions that oppress women, and thus exhibit female agency as both appropriate and socially essential. These visualizations help to normalize women's struggle to resist any kind of oppression by men and provide viewers with new images of female model other than submission.

In addition, Pakistani dramas are also gradually promoting the emotional and psychological autonomy of women in their empowerment stories. Female characters are no longer confined to the margins of males/focused male narratives but are now mainstreamed as actors with independent agency, suffering from personal issues, and having multiple facets of emotions (Qureshi et al., 2024). This shift demonstrates the rising role of feminist discourse in media and new audience trends toward truer and more multifaceted portrayals of women. Urban middle class viewers, especially young women, are growing increasingly drawn to stories and narratives that address their struggles for personal autonomy, aspirations for education, and experiences of everyday life.

Some of the modern dramas also present the image of female solidarity and community resistance towards patriarchy. Other stories, instead of showing women only as rivals fighting for the attention of men or women that have control over the house, highlight women's mutual support, friendship and struggle to resist gender discrimination (Wickström et al., 2021). Such depictions break the vicious cycle of stereotypes, which pervade women's lives at home and make enmity and envy a natural way of life. From the context of the two female-centered narratives that focus on self-respect, career growth and emotional healing, it can be observed that there has been a gradual shift in the representation of women in Pakistani media culture.

In spite of these forward strides, empowerment stories are still subject to culturally negotiated boundaries. Independent women are often depicted as "problematic" unless they threaten the family norms, patriarchal authority, and social values (N. Tariq, 2024). Modesty, family-femme, emotional sacrifice and "patriarchal" respectability are all desired traits in the character of a woman. In this way, dramas in TV media frequently create a select empowerment for women both in terms of visibility and agency, while the traditional image of femininity and obedience is still reinforced.

Furthermore, there are commercially successful dramas that may exploit women's empowerment in a thinly disguised manner. In addition, there are some commercially successful dramas portraying women's empowerment but without changing the status quo of gender inequality. Empowerment of women can be limited to individual achievements and successes instead of going into a systemic struggle against patriarchy, legal discrimination, and socio-economic marginalization (A. Sarwar & Ishfaq, 2024). Thus, empowerment storytelling

sometimes is more about the symbol of modernity than about challenging the status quo of women's power.

However, the growing number of potent female characters in Pakistani dramas is a positive change that must be noted in the Pakistani media. The narratives help perpetuate current discussions on women's rights, personal freedom, and gender equality in society. While not without fault or ideologically driven, contemporary empowerment shows suggest that Pakistani television dramas are slowly becoming contested terrains in which the traditional patriarchal modes of thinking are questioned and dethroned.

Persistence of Patriarchal and Gender Stereotypes

Although the words of the women empowerment storyline have become common in Pakistani television dramas in today's time, the pattern of representation for mainstream media is still the same as that of a patriarchy. Gradually, dramas start to make women look like educated and socially active women, but such depictions are inscribed in common discourses that affirm the authority of men, conformity in the homes, and gendered moralized expectations. Thus, the portrayal of the gender in Pakistani dramas is a contradictory scene of an environment in which progressive images coexist with the extreme patriarchal values.

The stereotype of Pakistani women as self-sacrificing and emotionally submissive, with the sole job of maintaining family unity and social honor is one of the most consistent that haunts their dramas (Javed et al., 2025). It is common for female characters to put up with emotional abuse, injustice in marriage, bad relationships, domestic exploitation due to the reasons of being patient, loyal and morally upright according to the culture. Such stories make women's pain acceptable as a characteristic of their valorous nature, and discourage women from resisting control of the male. When women's endurance is celebrated it encourages gender inequalities because it depicts the importance of being obedient and sacrificing as a virtue of "respectable" femininity.

The other typical stereotype is about women's bifurcation in moral terms, good and bad woman. In general, women that conform to traditional gender roles and expectations around modesty, domesticity, and obedience are portrayed positively, while those who are ambitious, outspoken, career oriented, or independent are generally portrayed negatively as morally questionable, selfish, or socially destructive (Shamim & Rafek, 2024). This binary system collapses women's identities to a narrow range of cultures stereotypes, and restricts the scope of representation of women's experience to realism or diversity. These images further support the social fears about altering gender roles and women's growing social independence.

Pakistani dramas also continue to generate stereotypes on marriage and the social status of women. Women's life is usually attributed to marriage, and unmarried or divorced women, as well as those women who are independent in the field, are often referred to as incomplete, emotionally unstable or problematic ones (Khursheed et al., 2025). The criterion for evaluating success in women is not their achievements or intelligence, but their marriage and acceptance in the home. In stories about empowerment for women, the desire to be empowered to pursue their aims is frequently bound to a woman's relationship with a man and her duties within the family, continuing the idea that women are fundamentally reliant upon men's approval for who they are.

In addition, TV dramas often depict women as rivals within the household, for instance, in the episodes about jealousy, competition, inheritance issues, and friction between husbands and wives (Levine, 2020). Women villains tend to be depicted as conniving, materialistic and emotionally unbalanced characters, posing a threat to the family integrity as well as to the social values of the society. Portrayals like this run the risk of perpetuating negative perceptions of relationships with women and reinforcing misogynistic assumptions about women's emotional instability. These stereotypes are repeated often, and help to create a media culture where women's individuality and complexity are lost in sensationalized domestic conflict.

Similarly, patriarchal stereotypes exist in an enduring manner and have a strong association to the commercial logic of television production. The producers of dramas tend to use culturally known stories that will interest viewers and earn television ratings (Levine, 2020). This is because conservative, family-focused audiences are still a large part of the Pakistani drama industry audience and producers are typically wary of dramatizing views which are very critical of the gender division. They then take a "safe modernity" approach in many dramas with women portrayed as well-educated and active in society, but who are ultimately reinforcing patriarchy and traditional values of the family.

Differences in religious and cultural interpretation also shape gendered representations in the Pakistani media. In dramas, women's conduct, clothing, movement and lifestyle are often judged on a moral basis and in society there are certain ways in which the autonomy of women is being controlled (Safdar & Khan, 2020). Sociable female characters that defy socially acceptable behavior are likely to be met with punishment in the form of social contempt, unfulfilled relationships, emotional suffering, or moral redemption. This type of narration is a way of creating the notion that women's independence is subject to social control and must be restricted.

The continued presence of patriarchal stereotypes in today's dramas illustrates how they are still playing an ideological role in Pakistan and serve as sites for the reproduction of dominant cultural values. Frequently, contemporary dramas focus on women empowerment, but the stories do not escape from the larger framework of the patriarchy that structures media production and audience's expectations. Because of this, limited conceptions of female agency serve to support traditional gender hierarchies and cultural power structures in television dramas.

Commercialization, TRP Culture, and Gendered Narratives

The electronic media in Pakistan has evolved so much since its commercialization that the thematic direction and the story line of dramas have undergone dramatic change too. Since media liberalisation in early 2000s, private entertainment channels had started functioning in a highly competitive market environment where advertising revenue, audience ratings, sponsorships and digital viewership have become the factors driving the channels. In this business environment, TV dramas started to shift from being socially conscious to business-oriented media products with a maximum attraction of the public's attention and participation (M. H. Sarwar et al., 2025). In turn, the portrayal of women in Pakistani dramas came to be tied with TRP-oriented storytelling, which often featured melodramatic domestic portrayals, emotional antagonism, and sensationalism over complex and socially meaningful gender explorations.

The greatest impact of commercialization is the extreme repetition of storylines dominated by a conflict with marriage, domestic conspiracy, love triangle, women enmity, emotional victimization, etc. (Zaheer, 2020b). Females are frequently “created” from a highly emotional framework to appeal to viewers and build their interest and sympathy for long serials. These depictions help to commercialize women's distress, with female trauma, humiliation and sacrifice being the staple stock and sales of the emotions. As a result, gender oppression can be treated as humorous and play as an issue rather than an institutionalized social problem.

There has also been an enhancement in the usage of stereotypical female characters through TRP culture as the familiar and stereotypical gender characters are being seen as commercially “safe” and “culturally acceptable” for mass audiences (M. T. Khan, 2025). Frequently actors rely on archetypes like the victim or innocent victim, wife of a savior, the oppressive mother-in-law, or the cunning competitor woman to guarantee that the viewers will recognize them, and that they will connect with the film emotionally. These portrayals are repetitive, making women's experience seem to be contained in easily discernible story types, and at the same time discouraging more nuanced or atypical images of women. When it comes to gender transformative storytelling, commercial demands tend to limit creative space.

Advertisers also are growing in influence on gender representation in television dramas. Media products have become increasingly targeted to the middle class family consumer, who are the main consumers of household products, fashion brands, cosmetics and lifestyle products in urban areas (Iram et al., 2023). Women are thus often given a stereotypical image, which is produced aesthetically and marketed as a product of consumer society, linked to beauty, fashion, to domestic perfection, and to social respectability. These portrayals help to promote ideals of femininity and to commodify women's identities for the purposes of consumption. The commercialization of the media and the consumer economy, then, helps to create femininity as a cultural and marketable performance.

Moreover, a shift towards digital streaming and user engagement in social media has changed the production priorities in the Pakistani entertainment landscape. In addition to targeting TV ratings, the shows are now also targeting views on YouTube, online trends and viral clips, as well as discussions on social media (Hamza et al., 2025). A digital contest that will attempt to elicit emotional responses, controversy and online discussion through dramatized storytelling approaches. Promotional marketing often extends and emphasizes scenes of domestic abuse, toxic masculinity, gender conflict, and moral scandal, as they create more audience engagement over digital platforms. Thus, popular plays may focus their stories more on sensation than social responsibility when depicting gender. This means that commercial dramas may attract more stories with sensational gender images rather than socially responsible images.

Meanwhile, commercialization has afforded some innovation in telling stories about women. As a result, some producers are beginning to realize that an urban and youthful demographic are craving compelling female-led characters, socially-relevant content and stories centered around women's rights issues, and that this is on the rise (Zaheer, 2020c). There are times when dramas about women learning, women at work facing harassment, emotional distress and/or legal injustice gain popularity, leading the media industries to experiment with new ways of representing women. But these stories, in many cases, can be skillfully toned down to not offend right-leaning viewers or to defy masculine conventions.

This commercialization of entertainment industry thus gives rise to a significant contradiction in women's representation in Pakistan. On the other hand, competition helps to maintain diversity, experimentation and socially-relevant themes on women's empowerment. Let's face it, however, the marketing-driven narrative often perpetuates sensationalized, stereotyped and patriarchal narratives that ensure audience engagement and commercial success. This creates a mixed media culture where positive gender views and messages coexist with monetized misogynist and normalizing narratives.

Overall, the process of TRP culture and the commercialization of Pakistani television series has created one contested space where the economic grid has proven to have tremendous impact in making up of gender stories. Women's representation in the current dramas can thus not be isolated from the cultural and ideological issues that they have produced; it is also a result of Market forces, consumer expectations and Media capitalism in the entertainment industry of Pakistan.

Digital Audience Reception and Social Media Discourse

The advent of the digital media platforms has actually changed the relationship between audience and Pakistani dramas on television. The contemporary television viewer is an active participant in the interpretation, criticism, and reconstruction of television content, as opposed to a passive consumer of television. Contemporary television viewers are active interpreters, commentators, and reshapes of television narratives, rather than passive consumers of television. With this trend towards participatory digital culture, public discourse on gender representation in dramas, empowerment of women, misogyny and patriarchal stereotypes have become more visible in dramas. Therefore, it has become more and more important to look into the audience's apprehension of television narratives and how they interact with them because of that, in the Pakistani context. In view of this, audience reception analysis has taken significance because the viewers can now be seen as an interactive partner in the process of the social impact of television narratives in the current Pakistan.

Nowadays social media has become an interactive platform where fans collectively talk about the different drama scenes, discuss about the behavior of the characters, make a discussion about the moral lesson, state their opinions about women's portrayal etc. (Hamza et al., 2023). The audiences are often very vocal when watching drama; they discuss very minutely about the controversial themes of a drama, the toxic relationship(s) that are being shown, domestic abuse and the discrimination of any kind of gender in online discussions. Viewers help shape the meaning of women characters and critique gender representations through hashtags, memes, reaction videos and ratings on the Internet. The participatory setting has given a much more prominent exposure to people, concerning the existence of misogynistic narratives and stereotypes that reside in entertainment media.

The emergence of feminist critique and gender-sensitivities in watching media amongst younger audiences is one such development in the realm of digital audiences culture (Sahar, 2023). The education of the populace in urban areas is a key factor in the effective use of social media as a tool to criticize the narratives that victimize women, romanticize abuse, and lead to stereotypical portrayals of women in Pakistani dramas. In particular, women viewers often doubt stories that deem women to be sacrificing themselves or tolerating emotional manipulation, forced marriages, and domestic violence for the sake of family honor. This criticism is an example of the

feminist discourse that is being created within digital public space technologies, and it highlights a shift in societal norms and values toward gender equality and women's rights.

Digital media has also magnified viewers' demands for realistic and multidimensional female characters. There is a growing audience expectation of characters who are more than just domesticated housewives and women with emotional depth, professional goals, and agency (Saleem & Shafiq, 2025). When a TV drama that has a strong female character is created, it will sometimes be appreciated and supported plenty of online, which will make the producers want to create more progressive themes in the mainstream entertainment content. This has consequently become a part of the TV industry's social feedback to influence production decisions, promotional strategies and storytelling approaches in Pakistan.

Yet, the (digital) discourse on the representation of women is still very polarized and ideologically charged. There are several different levels of components of the dynamic between feminist and conservative interpretations within the process of creating an image. Conservatives uphold traditional images of women, and they might argue for such images using religious, cultural, or moral reasoning, while progressive audiences might urge feminist interpretations and/or gender-sensitive narratives (Tahir & Qayyum, 2025). Often, when men and women discuss female characters on social media, there are underlying conflicts between modernity and conservatism, as well as between individualism and family values and between feminism and patriarchy. With dramas, patriarchal values are persistent in cyber public culture — for women who play assertive, ambitious roles, or are sportsmen, or have unconventional lifestyles, their online actions are subject to intense critique of their morals.

Digital platforms also have algorithmic structures that affect audience reception, by favoring emotionally charged and controversial content. Betrayal, gender conflict, emotional breakdowns and toxic masculinity make for a dramatic and engaging scene that many see as viral content because it can start conversations and get involved in chatting online (Thorson, 2020). There is a possibility that this digital visibility can contribute to sensationalized gender narratives, and not to critical considerations of structural inequalities. Popular trends are increasingly being used in television production with the concept of picking controversial scenes and properly marketing them for maximum online viewership and interaction.

Meanwhile, counter-narratives and media accountability have grown new avenues in the digital sphere. Through the use of social media, activists, journalists, academics and feminist commentators are now challenging the misogynistic content and calling for more ethical and ethical portrayal of women in Pakistani Entertainment Media (Saboor et al., 2022). Criticism of harmful portrayals through online campaigns can sometimes challenge the television channel and/or the producer to question problematic storylines or to issue a public response. This is a changing digital world, so this has increased the democratic, participatory space of audience and critical engagement with media.

This case study demonstrates the evolving symbiosis of traditional media and online culture through the example of Pakistani TV dramas and audience talk. The interaction between the Pakistani television dramas and audience discourse in digital space exemplifies the increasing intertwining of traditional media with internet culture. The audiences for social media are not just viewers of television programs, but they actively help to interpret, debate, and hold media accountable with regard to representation of gender. Digital audience reception is therefore an

important nexus where competing discourses over women's empowerment, morality, patriarchy and women are negotiated on a daily basis in the Pakistan context.

Critical Analysis

Television drama is a highly heterogeneous medium and when women are included, there are competing ideologies, cultural and commercial interests at play in these Pakistani dramas. As dramas become more progressive in themes and messages of women's empowerment, independence and overthrow of patriarchal oppression, they continue to be constrained by conservative cultural values and industry market criteria for a progressive storyline. Therefore, it is futile and simplistic to characterize the presence of women in Pakistani dramas as “progressive” or “regressive” since it is rather a result of the continuous negotiation between the modern understanding of the gender discourse and the already entrenched patriarchy.

This research aimed to know and examine how empowered female characters in contemporary dramas are – and how that empowerment is limited and controlled. Women are increasingly presented as educated, successful in their careers and emotionally dominant ones, yet such independence is not seen as acceptable unless it can be kept in line with traditional ideas of family values and patriarchal social norms (Hashmi, 2022). Authorities usually punish a female character for asserting himself/herself too forcefully against an oppressive structure (narrative punishment), make her female character suffer emotionally or morally (emotional or moral suffering), or correct her character's mistake (moral correction). This means Pakistani dramas in a sense seem to support a version of empowerment which is negotiated between culture and its actors, allowing women to have some voice without challenging the power of men or the position of their social class.

This is more evident in the moralization of female identity in the TV narrative, where the patriarchal ideology can be seen. Women are still judged based on the norms of modesty, sacrifice, submission, and family duties that are conventionally accepted in society (Tahir et al., 2025). Limiting to marriage, family acceptance and emotional caring is a theme that is often repeated even in progressive dramas. Often, the representation of a female ambition and success is equated with subservience and a focus on the hearth, illustrating the general patriarchal concept that women have to choose between being empowered and ‘feminine.’ These imagines show how restrictive the gender reform as represented by media are in conservative societies.

However, it is important to point out that the modern Pakistani drama is not all and sundry imbued with patriarchy. Even if TV narratives have not provoked the reorientation of conventional media towards the topics, they have undeniably brought these topics into the public agenda, previously off the popular political agenda or out of the mainstream political culture. Today, topics like domestic violence, workplace harassment, forced marriage, women's mental health, divorce and women autonomy are brought into the limelight and part of entertainment discourse (Sadiq et al., 2025). More attention to women's stories is a major shift from earlier times in tv production when women were, for the most part, strictly relegated to a passive and secondary role. As such, Pakistani dramas serve as spaces of important social anxiety negotiating and changing expectations of gender.

These narratives, however, have their transformative potential limited by the commercial model, which is prevalent in Pakistan's entertainment industry. The role of digital media, TRP ratings and

advertisers' influence in shaping narratives allows for sensationalized and emotional reporting that often shifts attention from the social issues to issues of conflict and controversy (Levine, 2024). The oppression endured by the women is often sensationalized for entertainment value, not analyzed as a structural product of women's oppression. Such portrayals in dramas, therefore, can accidentally moralize problematic masculine behavior, emotional abuse, and unequal relationships, by repeatedly presenting them in romanticized or melodramatic settings. Moreover, class and urban bias are still seen to be dominating representation in Pakistani dramas. The characters in the narratives that are empowered women are mostly portrayed as educated and middle class women who are part of the urban society and enjoy social mobility and economic opportunities (Zaheer, 2020d). Women are under-represented or representatively stereotyped as rural women, working class women, religious minorities, or women from a structural economic margin. This selective representation excludes the representation of empowerment stories and highlights the existing inequalities in Pakistan's social and media dynamics.

But electronic engagements with an audience have created new accountability and criticism in entertainment. Social media platforms are increasingly used to go against misogynistic narratives and to push for more realistic portrayals of women (Umar, 2024). The criticism of television by those who watch it has changed – there are ads regarding a "toxic relationship" and "about time for the ladies" – it is no longer passive consumption of television. This changing digital discourse has challenged producers to be more responsive to gender-sensitive issues, but commercial interests still determine the scope of responsiveness.

On a larger socio-cultural level, Pakistani tales on the television screens mirror the transitional aspect of Pakistani society that is itself. The interplay of empowerment discourse with stereotypical discourses of the male clearly reflects a continuing struggle between tradition and modernity in society, conservative and liberal views, and collective and individual morality (Khoja-Moolji, 2021). As a result, television dramas are continuously and ceaselessly sites of construction, contestation and renegotiation of competing visions of womanhood and gender relations.

In conclusion, modern Pakistani dramas on television neither break free from the traditional manner of representation of women nor fully restrict them to a particular stereotype. Rather, they create gender stories that contest and consolidate male hegemony. This contradiction not only opens possibilities for social change via the media, but also highlights its constraints in countries like Pakistan that are culturally conservative.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore critically the depiction of women in Pakistani modern TV serials in between empowering and continued stereotype of women. This study has proven that while women's participation in media has certainly not remained the same or progressed in an even manner in Pakistan, rather it has been influenced by a constant conflict between the changing socio-cultural context and the ingrained gendered ideology. Today's dramas often portray educated, working, socially conscious women, but these roles are generally limited to those of women whose roles are traditional and whose values are upheld by conventional gender norms. One of the important outcomes of this study is, the level of empowerment among the women in Pakistani dramas is quite "conditional." Within the limits of a story, the agency and independence

of women are established, but they are certainly not shaken up the foundations of patriarchy. When female characters are oppressed or strive for personal freedom, their stories frequently end with a personal sacrifice and a moral renouncement or with a return to traditional family structures. This suggests that the empowerment is often over-aestheticized, it is not a fully developed social discourse.

The study also recognizes the positive role that Pakistani dramas have now played in raising public awareness of women issues. Domestic violence, workplace harassment, forced marriage, emotional abuse, and other themes have been taken into the mainstream, and the awareness and conversation around these issues has broadened. In many cases however, the discussion about these issues is still circumscribed in melodramatic and commercially motivated discourses that prevent a more substantive critique of the structure.

Patriarchal stereotyping continues to be a hallmark of Pakistani television discourses. Women remain classified according to the duality of the moral framework of idealization and cautionary tales of 'moral failure'. These portrayals continue to perpetuate traditional gender norms and restrict the complexity of femininity in the mainstream culture. Moreover, commercialization and TRP production norms reinforce the use of prevalent stereotypes, thereby perpetuating them in familiar narratives.

Finally, the study demonstrates the increasing relevance of digital audience reception as a factor that can influence the media discourse. Newly established sites of critique, resistance and negotiation of gender representations on social media platforms. People are increasingly challenging misogynistic depiction of women and are looking for more realistic and empowering portrayal of women. This is a participatory digital space that mimics a growing shift in cultural expectations while at the same time being product of the judicious necessary for commercialism. In general, Pakistani TV dramas reflect society's inherent tensions between gender, modernity and tradition. They are cultural texts through which the antagonisms of ideology meet, creating hybrid cultural dramatizations which question and affirm patriarchal norms. Women's presence in these dramas thus reflects the transitional nature of the social landscape in Pakistan where aspirations for gender equality co-exist with perpetuated patriarchal structures.

Future interventions in the media and academic circles need to emphasize more sophisticated, representative, and structurally aware rendering of women, as well as promoting true gender equality (substantive empowerment). In order to make Pakistani television dramas truly transformative cultural spaces, they must be able to engage with media production and audience discourses over a prolonged period.

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