

Aysha Bilal *

A Study of Cultural Transformation: Through The Portrayal of Women In Pakistani Drama

Abstract

Launched in 1964 being the only national Television Network (PTV) played a vital role in shaping the society. The writers and directors of drama serials of PTV took the responsibility to reform social constructs through their programs especially television serials. These serials used to air on PTV before the introduction of cable TV in the country and were popular in neighboring countries along with Pakistan¹. Since its inception PTV till 1990's has been using the power of electronic media to build narratives in the society by developing the content, ranging from progressive to realist. Most of the play wrights took inspirations from deep rooted Urdu tradition in midst of the influential literary movements around the world. Pakistani writers paved the way for par excellence content against the backdrop of complex socio-cultural, political and religious contexts with strict censorship policies. Pakistani drama has been holding distinct identity till late 80's by experimentation between realism, social realism, critical realism and romantic realism². This paper examines the cultural transformation through the shift in portrayal of female characters in Pakistani TV drama by textual analysis of two dramas from 80's and 2000's.

Keywords: PTV Drama, Women, Gender, Melodrama, Humsafar, Tanhaiyan

Introduction

Television has the power to generate the content to initiate discourse about social issues of different sorts including gender, socioeconomics, injustice and class structures³. Pakistan Television Network (PTV) through quality programs and dramas has been addressing all these issues time and again during its golden era. PTV has been playing a vital role in educating its audiences by familiarizing them with newer ideas. It also took the responsibility to enable the viewers to face the realities around them. Rural and urban visuals were represented at the same time on screen to educate people from both areas about each other's culture and challenges. Image of modern educated Pakistani woman used to be represented in derogatory style in cinema till 70's. PTV took the challenge to correct this false image through number if its serials with female centric dramas⁴.

Media being one of strongest pillars for nation-state holds the authority to shape up ideologies. According to Suleman "we perceive ideology as a system of representations and socio-cultural negotiations which is prevalent and represented

* Aysha Bilal, Ph.D. Researcher, PRCCA, CAD, University of the Punjab, Lahore,
Associate Professor University of Home Economics, Gulberg, Lahore.

in various ways in art, literature and media”⁵. Researcher belongs to the lucky generation whose mentors were developed in their childhood through classic PTV dramas. Brave and economically independent female characters with balance of sensitivity and morality in dramas of 80’s including *Teesra Kinara*, *Dhoop Kinare*, *Ankahi* and *Tanhaiyan* are still role models for most of today’s young working women. These dramas are from the time when in Pakistan women representation in media houses was less than one percent⁶.

Over the course of time Pakistani drama industry has seen significant increase in inclusion of women in variety of roles such as writing, production and channel ownership. One of the most prominent examples is Sultana Siddiqui who has been working as producer in PTV a long time ago and for fifteen years owns largest TV channel network Hum TV with biggest market share in drama viewership⁷. Despite of prominent share of women in media a clear shift can be seen in portrayal of the female characters. Female representation as pitiable, domestic and villain-like has taken place of strong female role models. According to an acclaimed playwright of recent times Bee Gul whose female characters deviate from what’s going on at mainstream media, since TV has been commercialized, the content produced is without the sense of quality and responsibility⁸.

Suleman quotes Iftikhar Hassan (1981), in *Representation of gender in prime time television* that “due to stereotypical presentation of women in textbooks, women are forced to accept that they have no goals, no need to speak for their rights and they perceive themselves as commodities, as objects”⁹. Unlike PTV in golden era channels and media houses after liberation act of 2002 have taken easy and quick path of producing content in bulk and have been adapting scripts from already published novels in local women digests with those unreal fantasies which not tend to happen in real life. TV channels in Pakistan recruit digest authors, mostly female, for drama scripts. The choice of topics is mostly intimate personal issues such as, marital complications including extra marital affairs, unhealthy relationships of women with inlaws and domestic hardships based on the controversies planned by relatives¹⁰.

Pakistani TV drama has been based on women representation as key figure in the socio-economic constructs in past. In age of globalization, role of media is becoming more crucial to educate people about integral role of women in uplifting of society. However with start of new millennium Pakistani drama is deviated from the track and female roles have been domesticated and confined to stereotypes. After 2000’s a dramatic shift in representation of women characters can be seen in majority of TV dramas aired by multiple private channels. Females are represented either as victimized and pitiable or lustful and conspirator on domestic backdrops. This paper through textual analysis, discusses two block buster dramas *Tanhaiyan* and *Humsafar* from 80’s and 2000’s respectively to document 360-degree shift in women representation.

Tanhaiyan (1985) written by Haseena Moeen and directed by Sahira Kazmi is set on urban backdrop represents strong and independent female characters with constructive ambitions. Women shown in this thirteen-episode drama serial have the will and wisdom to transform the odds of life in their favor while believing in

their own abilities. For these women marriage is not the priority of life rather they have much more to achieve and dream of. They are shown as actors of change in society which was aligned with already existing phenomenal role of women in post-partition Pakistan. A lot of women were involved in struggle for independence and APWA (All Pakistan's Woman's Association), founded in 1949 by Rana Liaquat Ali Khan. It was an apolitical organization, but it did raise a voice against inflation and other issues during Bhutto's regime¹¹. Thus the characters represented in the dramas of golden age PTV were of realist type and were rooted in society.

*Humsafar*¹², biggest blockbuster melodrama of 2011 by Hum TV and directed by acclaimed Sarmad Khoosat, is an adaptation from a novel penned by Farhat. *Humsafar* was released the same year in September when in early months Pakistan went through huge crises after assignation of Punjab's governor Salman Taseer and capturing of Osama Bin Ladan¹³. *Humsafar* belongs to the era of Pakistani TV dramas where women characters are presented from a contrasting angle than those of golden era of PTV. The star studded drama, set on the urban backdrop, is based on a life of a middle class female whose life is converted into hell by the fellow female characters including her mother in law and lover of her husband. Female protagonist is under educated and under confident with no power to stand against the wrong decisions or conspiracies against her. Protagonist is totally dependent on a male and a happy marriage that tends to happen after years of pain and misery in wait for a miracle to happen.

Characterization:

Zara played by Shehnaz Sheikh in *Tanhaiyan* (1985), is elder daughter of a couple who got married against the will of their families and was cut off from the family. As result Zara shares the fear along with her parents since her childhood and has developed mistrust about life even before the actual struggles starts. Despite being introvert Zara dreams to support her family after sudden loss of her parents in a car accident. She pushes her limits to the maximum and ultimately pays off the debts and retrieves the mortgaged house of her parents. In doing so she depends on her sole abilities without waiting for a miracle to happen or seeking financial support from any male figure. In opening scene Zara is hanging her father's hand painted portrait on the wall that shows her affection and idealism towards her father. In the very first conversation her father encourages her to be more vocal and more confident. There are three more prominent female characters including Zara's younger sister Sanya, Aani (aunt) and Vida, drama's male protagonist fiancé.

Humsafar (2011) is a production of Hum TV in cooperation is a highest rated drama with star cast of Fawad Khan and Mahira Khan. The drama is rooted in melodramatic tradition, conceived in domestic settings, on the backdrop of never-ending conspiracies towards female protagonist by her dear ones¹⁴. In this play female lead Khirad performed by Mahira Khan is daughter of a young widow of lower middle-class family of Hyderabad. In her introduction scene, Khirad is shown doing domestic tasks including washing clothes and kitchen work. Khirad is a serious and responsible girl who is in final year of her bachelors and helps her

mother in earning by giving tuitions to children from neighborhood. She wears traditional shalwar qameez and dupatta and ties her hair as symbol of modesty.

Second lead or antagonist of the same drama is Sara, played by Naveen Waqar. Sara is a well-educated young girl with an upper class background. In her first scene she is shown sitting in a café with Ashar played by Fawad Khan, having coffee. Sara is a confident and outspoken girl who gradually turns up to an obsessed character with psychological disorders. Despite of being independent working woman her only aim is to conquer Ashar, the male lead, by all means. “Strong professional women are often cast as villains in visual media”¹⁵. She is mostly shown in western clothing; a stereotypical representation of negativity in Pakistani dramas. Third most important character is Farida, mother in law of Khirad who runs an NGO for social work. Her character is pretty positive in start but she is revealed to be the main villain during later episodes.

Plot:

The female protagonists of both dramas face extreme problems in their lives and they respond towards these issues differently, the paper analysis their struggles one by one. Khirad of *Humsafar* (2011) leads a simple life with her mother, which comes to an end when her mother is diagnosed by last stage of cancer. Her maternal uncle, Mamoo, much above in economic status, decides to tie knot between his only son and Khirad against the will of his son and wife, Farida, in order to pay off his debts towards his sister. Khirad being known of the fact that she has been forcefully imposed on Ashar gets married to him to fulfill the wish of her dying mother. The maximum protest she does is in her thoughts by self-talking but unable to deliver her despair through dialogue to any other character.

Characters of Sara, Ashar’s cousin and Farida, Ashar’s mother are given equal importance in the plot. Sara is represented as a oversensitive or phobic girl who is obsessed with Ashar’s love. Once discussion of Ashar’s marriage with Khirad starts, her possessiveness towards Ashar reveals in the second episode where she directly threatens Khirad and humiliates her about her class, education and inferior personality. Sara even tries to commit suicide once her aunt Farida, Ashar mother, reveals that she had to agree on this proposal because he husband has threatened her of divorce if she refuse to accept his niece as daughter in law.

Despite all this mess Khirad halfheartedly enters the life of Ashar and starts an awkward relationship. In a weak moment of distress Khirad expresses her grief of being disgraced and unimportant in front of her uncle. Writer takes an easy escape and uses this conversation as realization point for Ashar when he over hears the dialogue and tries to break the ice in his relationship with Khirad. In the meanwhile Khirad is shown calling her friends or meeting them and explaining the plight she is going through. She is shown crying multiple times in the same domestic space, doing nothing but cursing her fate and wrong decision made by her mother and uncle through voiceover. In fifth episode Asher founds her crying while sitting on the floor beside pool in the midnight and shows polite gesture of care by picking her hand. This moment as ray of hope in their frozen relationship is magnified by the director through the camera frames and music treatment.

Ashar's slight affection starts improving the relationship and Khirad's lost confidence.

On the other side Sara gets jealous upon this progress and poisons Khirad through her conspicuous talk about Asher. Plot at every point reveals the sole purpose of both young females whether protagonist or antagonist is to seek for a male's approval. Another key character of the drama is Ashar's mother who throughout the story seems positive and supportive for her family but in middle of the story she is revealed as main culprit to tear apart his son's marriage out of grudge through a range of hidden conspiracies to assassinate Khirad's character. Farida even hires a boy to create such situations in Khirad's life that her character becomes suspicious for Ashar.

Treatment of *Humsafar* is melodramatic consisting of many high tone scenes, loud music, loads of tears, negative expressions and voiceovers based on self-conversation instead of resolving dialogues. And finally the conspiracies are revealed and cruel intentions of all people are wide open to Ashar by again "over hearing" his mother's self-talk and by reading an open letter of Khirad from four and half years back that is accidentally found by Ashar.

Zara, main lead of *Tanhaiyan* (1985), played by Shehnaz Sheikh, is a young girl full of motivation and courage to improve hers' and her family's life after the loss of her parents. Zara and her sister Sanya are bound to leave their house due to heavy debts on their father. None of their father's friends give any relief to the young girls resulting in building mistrust in Zara about any human relations. Originally Zara is very cautious about life but she tries to overcome all her fears and stands for an aim. Her way towards achieving her goals doesn't turn out to be easy when she faces the conflicts with her loved ones and with herself. She becomes workaholic to attain wealth and success in short time and start believing in wrong people, leaving behind her strong bonds.

Rushing to chase her dreams when she almost achieves what she wants, Zara gets struck by a car and gets paralyzed. Her fake relations, off course not the family like in *Humsafar*, leave her in the misery and her ignored relations step forward to stand beside her once again. She realizes her mistakes, though this time more shattered and even more mistrusted about her. Zara's family and friends help her to get out of this guilt and gradually she returns towards life with more positivity. Getting married or to seek confidence by attaching with a man is not the priority goal of Zara's life. Men exist in her life, some to betray her and some to support her but they are not primary characters.

Three major female characters are Sanya, Zara's sister played by Marina Khan, Aani, her aunt played by Badar Khalil and Vida played by Yasmin Ismail. Sanya is an innocent character with almost no complicated thought process but sensitive at heart. She trusts people around her and keep experimenting in everyday tasks even if it goes wrong. Sanya's character is as it should be of a young simple hearted girl under the shelter of her loved ones. Aani (aunt) is another powerful character who is single in mature age but financially stable, she helps out her nieces to move to Karachi and live with her at her rented house. She eventually marries to her landlord who is another positive human.

Lastly character of Vida is also a well-educated young woman who is engaged to Zain, Zara's childhood friend, who likes Zara but has been apart from her and her family for a long time. A natural conflict between Zara and Vida arises when Zara comes to know Vida as Zain's fiancé and vice versa. However in this conflict not even a single act of conspiracy and intention to damage other person's life is involved. Vida after realizing the natural bend of Zain towards Zara, parts her ways. Every character in the drama is with certain problems, challenges, emotions of love and anger but none of them uses his or her grievances and failures to cheat, tease or destroy other's lives. Though the play wright Haseena Moen has shown some fatal incidents in this drama but she has shown people fighting them back and making their lives better on their own.

Conclusion:

In dramas of 70s, 80s and early 90s the female characters were career oriented, challenging, independent, and sensitive and hold strong character. Sabahat Zakariya's in *Drama Serials: Golden Age?* describes the female characters in Haseens Moen's dramas as "heroines challenged the status quo by being their bubbly, independent, if hopelessly romantic selves..."¹⁶. Whereas current dramas dominantly HUM TV dramas present the women with troubled image from a single dimension. Due the type of audiences who watch prime time dramas, channels are more concerned about the sellable content. "The story of a woman sells but the modern media has gone one step ahead by proving that the story of a woman being abused, tortured, beaten and humiliated sells faster"¹⁷.

Electronic media has the power to change the narrative of a society and transform the culture in any direction whether by showing empowerment of women or representing them as meek victims. Both eras of Pakistani TV have been serving the purpose of influencing the audiences; till 90's by showing independence of women and 2000 onwards by portraying them as dependent. This paper raises a question that what are the factors that have been so influential that media houses and channels are bound to show such domesticated, vulnerable and negative portrayal of women in the age where in reality Pakistani women are standing shoulder to shoulder with men to support countries economy through their passion for education and work. This issue will be discussed in the next research.

Notes & References

-
- ¹ Suleman, Saleha. *Representation of gender in prime time television*. Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1990.
- ² Bilal, Ahmad. "Munnu Bhai as Drama Writer." *Oriental Magazine*, 2019.
- ³ Tichi, Cecelia. *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- ⁴ Zubedi, Bilal. "Rise and Fall of Progressive Thought in Pakistan: An Appraisal." *Journal of Independent Studies*, 2013.
- ⁵ Suleman, Saleha. *Representation of gender in prime time television*. Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1990.
- ⁶ Suleman, Saleha. *Representation of gender in prime time television*. Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1990.
- ⁷ Javaid, Muhammad Kamran. "THE ICON INTERVIEW: FIFTEEN YEARS IN THE FAMILY." *Dawn.com*. January 19, 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1529211> (accessed May 23, 2021).
- ⁸ Lodhi, Rida. "Why the bad woman is so good for the TV industry." *Tribune.com.pk*. March 22, 2021. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2290760/why-the-bad-woman-is-so-good-for-the-tv-industry> (accessed May 24, 2021).
- ⁹ Suleman, Saleha. *Representation of gender in prime time television*. Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1990.
- ¹⁰ Zia, Afiya S. "The contrite gender formula of Meray Paas Tum Ho and the portrayal of women in cultural scripts." *Dawn.com*. February 3, 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1531866> (accessed May 20, 2021).
- ¹¹ Suleman, Saleha. *Representation of gender in prime time television*. Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1990.
- ¹² imdb. *imdb.com*. 2011. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2403201/> (accessed May 24, 2021).
- ¹³ Yaqin, Amina. "www.dailypioneer.com." *dailypioneer*. January 22, 2017. <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2017/sunday-edition/pakistans-love-affair-with-humsafar.html> (accessed May 19, 2021).
- ¹⁴ Kothari, Suchi. "From genre to zanaana: Urdu television drama serials and women's culture in." *Contemporary South Asia*, 2005.
- ¹⁵ Talib, Saman. "Pakistani Media and Disempowerment of Women." In *Challenging Images of Women in the Media: Reinventing Women's Lives*, by Jane Campbell Theresa Carilli, 27-34. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books., 2012.
- ¹⁶ Zakariya, Saleha. "Drama Serials: Golden Age?" *Dawn*, March 03, 2013.
- ¹⁷ Majeed, Fatima. "Express Tribune, Blogs." March 15, 2014. <https://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/21387/the-problem-with-our-drama-industry-and-its-depiction-of-pakistani-women/> (accessed December 9, 2017).