

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN PRIVATE TELEVISION SERIALS OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The portrayal of women characters in Pakistani private television serials has been a subject of academic and societal discourse, as these narratives both reflect and shape prevailing gender norms in society. This study critically examined the representation of women in ten prominent Pakistani dramas *Hadsa*, *Sar-e-Rah*, *Mayi Ri*, *Kuch Ankahi*, *Fitna*, *Ehsaan Faramosh*, *Qarz-e-Jaan*, *Dastak*, *Dil Wali Gali*, and *Noor Jahan* to assess whether these portrayals reinforce traditional stereotypes or contribute to progressive gender narratives. Using a qualitative approach, the research was linked with Pakistan private television serials. The analysis, grounded in feminist media theory and the representational framework of Shohat and Stam, identifies recurring themes, evolving archetypes, and narrative shifts over the past five years. The results reveal that while traditional portrayals of women as submissive, self-sacrificing, or morally polarized figures continue to dominate.

INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of female characters in Pakistani private television dramas has developed through various social, political, and cultural transformations. Before the liberalization of the media industry in the early 2000s, Pakistan Television (PTV) was the sole state-run channel that dominated national broadcasting. During the 1970s to 1990s, PTV produced dramas such as *Ankahi* (1982), *Tanhaiyaan* (1985), and *Dhoop Kinare* (1987), which presented women as educated, articulate, and emotionally strong individuals who balanced family responsibilities with personal aspirations (Khan, 2021; Yilmaz & Shakil, 2025). These portrayals reflected a moderate and progressive vision of Pakistani society that valued women's moral integrity while acknowledging their intellectual and emotional strength (RIAZ; Yilmaz & Batool, 2025). The early 2000s brought a turning point in Pakistani media history when General Pervez Musharraf's government allowed private ownership of television networks. This deregulation encouraged the establishment of private channels such as Geo TV, ARY Digital, and Hum TV, which rapidly expanded the entertainment landscape (Aziz, 2025; Tapal, 2023). These private networks introduced diverse storytelling styles and began to target urban, middle-class

audiences. The commercialization of television increased competition, and female characters became central to dramatic narratives focused on domestic life, morality, and romantic relationships (A. Tariq & M. Husnain, 2025). However, despite increased visibility, the portrayal of women often reinforced traditional gender norms. Many private channel dramas idealized the image of the “good woman” self-sacrificing, loyal, and morally pure while condemning the “bad woman” as rebellious or materialistic (Saleem & Shafiq, 2025). This binary representation perpetuated patriarchal ideology by rewarding conformity and punishing independence. Even popular dramas such as *Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan* (Geo TV, 2009) and *Humsafar* (Hum TV, 2011) depicted female virtue through suffering, endurance, and emotional restraint, reinforcing the notion that a woman’s moral strength lies in patience and silence (Aslam et al., 2025; A. Tariq & M. Husnain, 2025).

Problem statement

The role of media today was more pivotal than ever in shaping public opinion. It was often regarded as the “fourth pillar of the state”. Media and society were closely interrelated, each capable of influencing and reshaping the other in significant ways. This study focuses on the impact of electronic media, particularly television, in the transformation of society. It examines how television shapes social attitudes, values, and behaviors by analyzing both its content and its influence on viewers.

Significance of the research

Media scholars have been very concerned about the contested image of female gender. There were globally held stereotypical beliefs about roles of women and men (Endendijk & Portengen, 2025; Endendijk et al., 2013; J. J. Endendijk & C. M. Portengen, 2025). This synopsis aims to critically examine whether the portrayal of female characters in Pakistani television dramas was negative, stereotypical, misogynistic, or shaped by male-oriented biases. The women constitute approximately 48.6% of Pakistan’s total population. In contemporary society, the role of women has expanded significantly beyond the confines of domestic spaces. Pakistani women now actively contribute across diverse sectors, including agriculture, education, commerce, healthcare, media, and industry, showcasing their multidimensional presence in nearly every walk of life (Sadiq et al., 2025; Tariq & Husnain, 2025; A. Tariq & M. Husnain, 2025). Despite these evolving roles in reality, there was a growing concern that the representation of women in television dramas remains largely regressive often limited to domestic spheres, romantic entanglements, and traditional stereotypes (Ashfaq, 2023; Batool & Sohail Riaz, 2021; Imam, 2025; Imam et al., 2025). Media researchers have increasingly sought to explore how drama content shapes societal perceptions and whether such portrayals accurately reflect the complexity of real-world female experiences((Subhani, 2024).

Rational of the research

The issue of women’s rights and their representation in Pakistani media constitutes a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, deeply embedded within socio-cultural and religious discourses. Pakistan, under the Constitution of Pakistan 1973, was defined as a democratic Islamic state that upholds the principles of equality, justice, and fundamental rights for all citizens irrespective of gender. The Constitution explicitly guarantees equal rights and

opportunities to women, reflecting a commitment to democratic values and social inclusion (Assembly, 1973; Rajper et al., 2026). However, despite these constitutional assurances, the practical realization of women's rights remains constrained by prevailing societal attitudes. In many instances, democratic ideals, particularly those concerning women's empowerment and autonomy, were perceived by segments of society as conflicting with traditional or religious interpretations, thereby limiting their acceptance and implementation. Historically, women in Pakistan have been granted political rights, including the right to vote. Women's suffrage was recognized at the time of independence in 1947 and was subsequently reaffirmed during the first general elections held in 1956 (Behera, 2026; Jalal, 1990; Muneer & Aryal, 2026).

Research objective

- To study the portrayal of female characters in private television channel dramas of Pakistan.
- To provide suggestions to the media industry in order to reduce the gender stereotypes in the portrayal of women in the serials of television in Pakistan.

Research Questions

- RQ1. were core issues of Pakistani females projected through Pakistani Private TV channel dramas?
- RQ2. How female characters were portrayed in terms of physical appearance?

Limitations

Pakistan's cultural and social norms were dynamic and developed. This means that the results may reflect a certain period of time and may not represent long-term trends.

Delimitations

This study focuses on depicting female traits and does not analyses a wide range of topics such as class conflict, politics, and etcetera except when directly intersected with gender representations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on media representations of women demonstrates that television dramas frequently mirror and perpetuate societal gender biases while occasionally serving as platforms for progressive discourse (Zia, 2009; Zia, 2018). In the Pakistani context, research indicates that female characters were predominantly confined to domestic spaces, often depicted as self-sacrificing mothers, submissive wives, or scheming villains archetypes that reinforce patriarchal norms (Khan, 2021; Saleem et al., 2020). Such portrayals not only reflect cultural stereotypes but also risk normalizing gender inequality by limiting women's roles to emotional labor and moral policing (Saeed, 2021; Sarwar & Ishfaq, 2024). A persistent critique of Pakistani dramas was their tendency to romanticize female suffering, framing endurance of abuse or injustice as virtuous rather than empowering resistance (Khatun, 2024). Studies note that women were seldom shown in authoritative professional roles such as CEOs, politicians, or scientists which perpetuates the notion that leadership and ambition were masculine traits (Afsheen et al., 2022; Ahmed et al., 2022). For instance, content analyses reveal that only 12% of female characters in prime-time dramas between 2015–2020 held decision-making positions outside the home (Desai, 2021; Zeib, 2021). However, recent productions like *Udaari* (which addressed child sexual abuse and women's legal agency) and *Baaghi* (based on the life of social media influencer Qandeel Baloch) signal a potential shift toward more complex, socially conscious

narratives (Ittefaq et al., 2023). These dramas have sparked public debate by cantering female autonomy, resistance to oppression, and critiques of misogyny though such examples remain exceptions rather than the norm (Khan, 2021; Saleem et al., 2020). Scholars argue that these "disruptive" narratives gain traction precisely because they contrast sharply with dominant tropes, suggesting audience readiness for change (Malik, 2022). This review underscores the need to interrogate whether newer dramas were systematically challenging stereotypes or if progressive portrayals remain tokenistic. It also highlights gaps in research exploring how audiences interpret these representations a key area for future study. The study of previous researches was the starting point of every research. Wimmer and Dominic (1994) mentions: "Literature review not only allows learning from (eventually adding to) previous research, but also saves time, effort and money" whereas (Augustine, 1997; Bourke, 1973; TeSelle, 1986) says that: "The purpose of the literature review was to know what type of research has been done in the area and what has been found in previous studies". These portrayals often reinforce traditional, patriarchal attitudes and sexist ideologies, thereby hindering efforts toward gender equality and the emancipation of women globally (Carter, 2011; Riaz, 2024).

Literature gap

Theoretical Underestimation: Feminist concepts such as male vision, feminism, and intersectionality have not been systematically applied to Pakistani dramas that lead to a gap between the world theory of feminist media and local television practices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist Media and Representation Theory

This theory focuses on how women and gender identities were constructed, represented, and interpreted within media texts. It argues that media was not a neutral reflection of reality but an active producer of cultural meanings that shape how society understands gender roles, power relations, and femininity. Stuart Hall's constructionist view of representation highlights that meaning was created through language, symbols, and cultural codes, making television dramas a powerful site for shaping public perceptions. Within this framework, Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" demonstrates how women were often positioned as objects of visual pleasure for male audiences, while Gaye Tuchman's idea of "symbolic annihilation" shows how women were frequently trivialized, stereotyped, or erased from significant roles. Feminist representation theory also emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, recognizing that women's portrayals were shaped not only by gender but also by class, religion, and cultural context, as articulated by (Chen & Zou, 2026; Crenshaw, 2014). Applied to Pakistani TV dramas, this theory allows researchers to examine how female characters were framed as "good women," "bad women," victims, or moral transgressors, and how narratives reinforce or challenge patriarchal norms. By analyzing these portrayals, feminist media theory exposes the ways in which media can both sustain traditional gender hierarchies and provide spaces for resistance and alternative representations of women.

Figure 1
Model of Feminist Theory

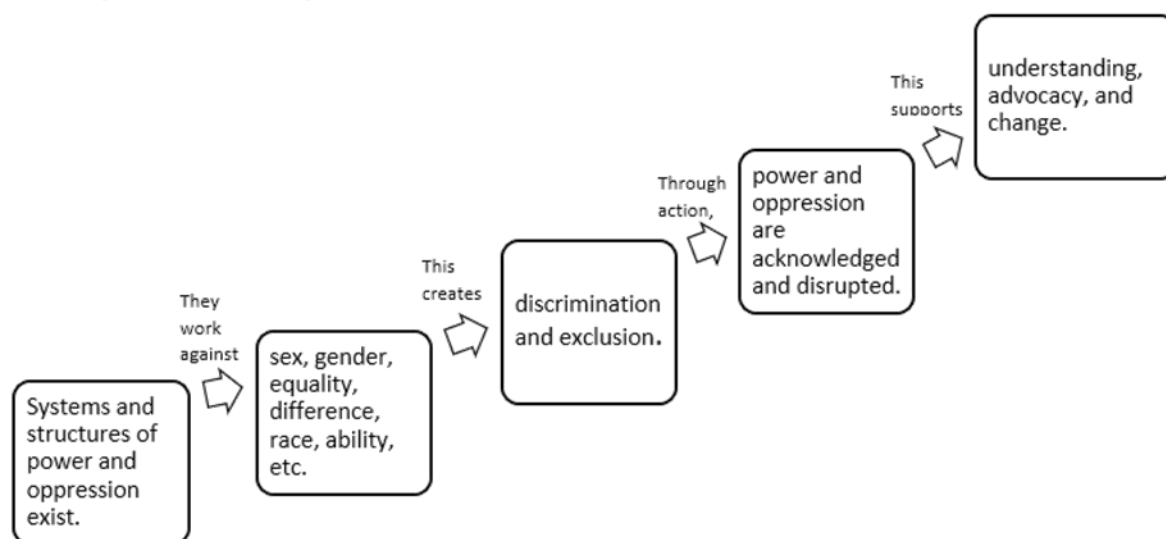


Figure 1: Shows a model of feminist theory. It starts with the realization that there was a system structure that was actively removed and does not affect people. These depression systems were not homogeneous. Rather, it was shaped by intersecting identities such as gender, race, class, and sexuality that can create specific discrimination and exceptions. The model also emphasizes that these oppressive systems can be challenged and revised due to the development of important knowledge and the desire for collective action. Ultimately, structures, demonstrate the possibilities of social change, justice and deeper understanding.

METHOD

Within this design, qualitative and descriptive research design has been adopted, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, representations, and cultural contexts rather than relying on numerical data. Textual analysis has been selected as the primary method of analysis, enabling a close examination of narratives, dialogues, character development, and visual representations of women in Pakistani private television dramas. Textual analysis was particularly effective for unpacking how cultural codes, symbolic structures, and discursive practices were employed to construct images of femininity and to reinforce or challenge patriarchal norms. The study was guided by the theoretical framework of feminism, which emphasizes the critical interrogation of gendered power relations and the ways in which women were represented, stereotyped, or marginalized in media. By combining feminist theory with qualitative textual analysis, the research aims to uncover how dramas aired on private channels such as Geo TV, ARY Digital, and Hum TV contribute to the production and circulation of dominant gender ideologies, while also identifying instances where alternative or resistant portrayals of women emerge in Pakistani television narratives.

A prevailing theme in Pakistani television dramas was the gender dichotomy that reinforces patriarchal ideals. Typically, male lead characters were portrayed as active agents, while female

leads were depicted as passive and dependent. This active-passive dichotomy reflects and perpetuates broader sexist ideologies, reinforcing socially constructed roles and power dynamics (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Applying Media Representation Theory, as conceptualized by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, allows for a critical examination of how Pakistani TV dramas present women through a patriarchal lens. Their theory posits that media representations were not neutral but were infused with ideological constructs that maintain dominant cultural narratives (Shohat & Stam, 1991). In the context of Pakistani television, female characters were often reduced to binary extremes either virtuous and obedient or immoral and rebellious—depending on their conformity to traditional gender expectations (Shohat & Stam, 2014). This reductionist approach ignores the complex realities of women’s lives and sustains harmful stereotypes. Shohat and Stam (1995) argue that binary oppositions in media—such as good vs. evil or passive vs. Assertive were used to construct meaning but often oversimplify social realities. In Pakistani dramas, this manifests in portrayals where female characters were either idealized as submissive daughters, mothers, and wives or vilified as transgressive and dishonourable figures. Such depictions reinforce patriarchal expectations and diminish the authenticity of women’s diverse identities and struggles (Hooks, 1984; Butler, 1990). Another critical concept in Media Representation Theory was the selective erasure of identities. Shohat and Stam (1994) highlight how media often silences marginalized voices. Pakistani dramas tend to omit the stories of women from varying socio-economic, ethnic, and professional backgrounds, instead promoting a monolithic image of womanhood defined by domesticity and dependence. This exclusion not only marginalizes alternative female narratives but also strengthens societal resistance to diversity and change. The target population were the private television serials, the sample selected serials were *Hadsa*, *Sare-Rah*, *Mayi Ri*, *Kuch Ankahi*, *Fitna*, *Ehsaan Faramosh*, *Qarz-e-Jaan*, *Dastak*, *Dil Wali Gali*, and *Noor Jahan*. Following was the selection criteria of the serials.

Serials selection criteria

The dramas were selected through purposeful sampling based on their relevance to feminist themes, the presence of strong female protagonists, and their cultural impact. These were chosen to capture a significant transition in Pakistani media narratives. A total of 25 dramas were selected that either reinforced traditional gender roles or challenged them, providing a balanced ground for feminist media analysis.

Table 1
Serials selection criteria for selection

Criteria	Description
Thematic Relevance	The drama needed to address issues such as gender roles, women’s empowerment, patriarchy, or feminist concerns.
Strong Female Characters	Central characters had to be women with clearly defined roles, agency, or struggles that drive the narrative.
Cultural/Social Impact	The drama had to gain popularity, generate critical discussion, or influence public opinion on gender-related issues.
Narrative Complexity	Preference was given to dramas with layered plots showcasing diverse female experiences across class, age, and social status.

Availability Complete episodes, scripts, or reliable summaries had to be accessible for comprehensive analysis.

Note. The above details were based on justification in the methods.

Data collection tool and data analysis tool

The following were the data collection tool and data analysis tool for the research

Table 2

Coding and Evaluation Process:

Indicator	Description
Female	Examines whether the female character makes independent decisions.
Agency	
Stereotypes	Considers if the character was portrayed in a clichéd or traditional role.
Resistance	Assesses whether the character challenges patriarchal norms.
Centrality	Determines if the woman was presented as a central figure or side-lined in the narrative.
Empowerment	Evaluates whether the character develops, grows, or gains freedom over time.

Note. Each drama analyzed scene-by-scene basis using these indicators. Key themes were identified and then compared across the sample to observe patterns and changes in women's representation over time.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The following were the findings of the research:

Textual analysis of Dramas

1. Channel: HUM TV Drama No. 1

Title: *Tere Jaaney Kay Baad* Year: 2006 Directed by: Babar Jawed Written by: Samina Aijaz Cast: S. Jibran, Sarwet Gellani, Gazal Salam, Sarah Choudhary, Faysal Qureshi, Tipu Shareef

Overall Assessment

Overall, *Tere Jaaney Kay Baad* provides female characters with substantial narrative importance, but their representation remains strongly influenced by conventional gender stereotypes. Meenal was primarily constructed through beauty, illness, marriage, motherhood, emotional dependence, and sacrifice. Isha was comparatively more active and emotionally expressive, yet she was also defined through caregiving, marriage, social respectability, and victimization.

The portrayal of Meenal particularly reflects the traditional television pattern identified by McNeil (1975), in which women were frequently associated with domesticity, romantic relationships, family responsibilities, and appearance. Similarly, Tuchman's (1978) concept of symbolic annihilation was relevant because Meenal's lack of an occupational or educational identity limits the representation of women as independent and professionally capable individuals. Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze was also useful in understanding the repeated emphasis on Meenal's beauty and physical attractiveness.

Therefore, the drama can be categorized as presenting women predominantly within the following character categories: the good woman, the romantic partner, the caregiver, the mother, and the victim. Although Isha demonstrates relatively greater agency than Meenal, her characterization ultimately remains connected to traditional expectations of femininity. The drama consequently provides emotional depth to its female characters but does not

substantially challenge the patriarchal structures that define women's social and personal identities.

2. Drama No. 2: *La Hasil* (2006)

Title: *La Hasil* Year: 2006 Directed by: Angeline Malek Written by: Umera Ahmed Cast: Noman Ejaz, Angeline Malek, Fahad Mustafa, Fayza Hasan, Khalid Ahmed, Yaser Akhtar

Overall Assessment of *La Hasil*

Overall, *La Hasil* presents female characters through a mixture of victimhood, transformation, motherhood, romance, morality, and social judgment. Katerina was the most complex female character because her journey moves from prostitution to marriage, religious transformation, motherhood, abandonment, and eventual acceptance. Her story exposes the consequences of judging women according to their past while simultaneously reproducing some of the stereotypes it appears to critique.

Mariam provides the strongest example of female agency. Her artistic aspirations, rational decision-making, and willingness to defend her mother allow her to challenge conventional expectations. Jessy, in contrast, represents the destructive consequences of abandonment and unresolved emotional trauma.

The drama therefore contains both progressive and traditional elements. It challenges the idea that a woman's past should permanently determine her worth, but it also presents female respectability through marriage, religious conformity, modesty, and motherhood. Consequently, the female characters can be classified as the good woman, bad woman, mother, daughter, romantic partner, victim, and woman associated with showbiz/prostitution.

3. Drama No. 3: *Mann o Salwa* (2007)

Title: *Mann o Salwa* Year: 2007 Directed by: Baber Javed Written by: Umera Ahmed Cast: Reysham, Faysal Qureshi, Noman Ijaz

Overall Assessment of *Mann o Salwa*

Mann o Salwa presents Zenab as a complex but ultimately tragic female character. She begins as an innocent, educated, and economically active young woman but was transformed by betrayal, social rejection, and the desire for revenge. Her transition into modelling provides her with financial independence and the ability to support her family, yet the drama simultaneously associates showbiz with sexualization and moral corruption.

The portrayal therefore contains a contradiction. Zenab's professional success demonstrates that a woman can achieve financial independence and support her family without relying on a man. However, her professional environment was constructed as morally dangerous, and her sexuality becomes a major source of social judgment. This reinforces conventional gender ideology even while presenting a woman with considerable agency.

Her character can consequently be classified under several categories: female in showbiz, female associated with prostitution and sexual stigma, female as victim, female in romantic relationships, female as caregiver/provider, and female demonstrating agency. The ultimate tragedy of her suicide emphasizes the destructive consequences of patriarchal judgment, reputational stigma, and social rejection, while also revealing the limitations placed upon female autonomy within the narrative.

4. Drama No. 4: *Ishq Junoon Deewangi* (2009)

Title: *Ishq Junoon Deewangi* Year: 2009 Directed by: Baber Javed Written by: Momena Duraidd Cast: Humayun Saeed, Adnan Siddiqui, Deepti Gupta, Humema Malick

Overall Assessment

Ishq Junoon Deewangi presents a significant contrast between professional female independence and traditional female victimhood. Seep represents a relatively progressive female character because she was professionally accomplished, emotionally independent, and capable of making decisions outside her marriage. Paras, however, was largely defined through beauty, romantic attachment, abuse, and victimhood.

The drama therefore contains both progressive and regressive elements. It challenges gender stereotypes through Seep's professional identity while simultaneously reinforcing conventional representations through Paras's sexualization and tolerance of domestic abuse. The two characters can consequently be classified as the good woman, professional woman, romantic partner, victim, and female character associated with showbiz and sexualization.

5. Drama No. 5: *Malaal* (2009)

Title: *Malaal* Year: 2009 Directed by: Mehreen Jabbar Written by: Umera Ahmed Cast: Faisal Rehman, Sarwat Gilani, Deepti Gupta, Imran Abbas, Adil Ahmed

Overall Assessment

Malaal presents Zeeniya as one of the more independent female characters in the sample. She was professionally active, self-respecting, rational, and unwilling to compromise her principles for romantic attachment. Mahi provides a contrasting representation of a younger, more traditionally feminine woman who experiences insecurity but eventually demonstrates agency by rejecting a toxic marriage.

The drama therefore challenges some conventional gender expectations while still placing both women within narratives dominated by marriage and romantic relationships. The principal categories applicable to the female characters were good woman, professional woman, romantic partner, wife, and victim.

6. Drama No. 6: *Vasl* (2010)

Title: *Vasl* Year: 2010 Directed by: Mehreen Jabbar Written by: Samira Fazal Cast: Ayesha Khan, Juggun Kazim, Imran Abbas, Ahsan Khan, Adnan Siddiqui

Overall Assessment

Vasl presents women primarily through marriage, motherhood, victimhood, and romantic relationships. Henna represents the self-sacrificing mother who gradually develops independence. Kamla represents the stereotypical "other woman," while Marina provides a more progressive representation of female education and employment but remains constrained by expectations of marriage and motherhood.

The major categories applicable to the female characters were wife, mother, romantic partner, victim, professional woman, and woman subjected to beauty standards.

7. Drama No. 7: *Main Abdul Qadir Hoon* (2010)

Title: *Main Abdul Qadir Hoon* Year: 2010 Directed by: Baber Javed Written by: Sarwat Nazir Cast: Fahad Mustafa, Areej Fatima, Aamina Sheikh, Saba Hamid

Overall Assessment

Main Abdul Qadir Hoon presents female characters through contrasting images of modernity, religiosity, motherhood, victimhood, and romantic dependence. Zareen's transformation from a modern and rebellious woman to a more religious and conventional woman creates a strong visual and ideological contrast. Nell's character represents spiritual transformation but also reinforces the idea that women require male guidance for religious development. Meera provides a more complex representation because she was professionally successful but was simultaneously criticized for her perceived emotional distance from her son. The drama therefore presents professional female independence as valuable but potentially incompatible with traditional maternal expectations. The major categories applicable to the female characters were good woman, morally questionable/modern woman, romantic partner, mother, working woman, and victim.

8. Drama No. 8: *Ishq Junoon Deewangi* (2009)

Title: *Ishq Junoon Deewangi* Year: 2009 Directed by: Baber Javed Written by: Momena Duraid Cast: Humayun Saeed, Adnan Siddiqui, Deepti Gupta, Humema Malick

Overall Assessment

Ishq Junoon Deewangi presents a significant contrast between professional female independence and traditional female victimhood. Seep represents a relatively progressive female character because she was professionally accomplished, emotionally independent, and capable of making decisions outside her marriage. Paras, however, was largely defined through beauty, romantic attachment, abuse, and victimhood.

The drama therefore contains both progressive and regressive elements. It challenges gender stereotypes through Seep's professional identity while simultaneously reinforcing conventional representations through Paras's sexualization and tolerance of domestic abuse. The two characters can consequently be classified as the good woman, professional woman, romantic partner, victim, and female character associated with showbiz and sexualization.

9. Drama No. 9: *Malaal* (2009)

Title: *Malaal* Year: 2009 Directed by: Mehreen Jabbar Written by: Umera Ahmed Cast: Faisal Rehman, Sarwat Gilani, Deepti Gupta, Imran Abbas, Adil Ahmed

Overall Assessment

Malaal presents Zeeniya as one of the more independent female characters in the sample. She was professionally active, self-respecting, rational, and unwilling to compromise her principles for romantic attachment. Mahi provides a contrasting representation of a younger, more traditionally feminine woman who experiences insecurity but eventually demonstrates agency by rejecting a toxic marriage. The drama therefore challenges some conventional gender expectations while still placing both women within narratives dominated by marriage and romantic relationships. The principal categories applicable to the female characters were good woman, professional woman, romantic partner, wife, and victim.

10. Drama No. 10: *Vasl* (2010)

Title: *Vasl* Year: 2010 Directed by: Mehreen Jabbar Written by: Samira Fazal Cast: Ayesha Khan, Juggun Kazim, Imran Abbas, Ahsan Khan, Adnan Siddiqui

Overall Assessment

Vasl presents women primarily through marriage, motherhood, victimhood, and romantic relationships. Henna represents the self-sacrificing mother who gradually develops independence. Kamla represents the stereotypical "other woman," while Marina provides a more progressive representation of female education and employment but remains constrained by expectations of marriage and motherhood. The major categories applicable to the female characters were wife, mother, romantic partner, victim, professional woman, and woman subjected to beauty standards.

11. Drama No. 11: Main Abdul Qadir Hoon (2010)

Title: *Main Abdul Qadir Hoon* Year: 2010 Directed by: Baber Javed Written by: Sarwat Nazir Cast: Fahad Mustafa, Areej Fatima, Aamina Sheikh, Saba Hamid

Overall Assessment

Main Abdul Qadir Hoon presents female characters through contrasting images of modernity, religiosity, motherhood, victimhood, and romantic dependence. Zareen's transformation from a modern and rebellious woman to a more religious and conventional woman creates a strong visual and ideological contrast. Nell's character represents spiritual transformation but also reinforces the idea that women require male guidance for religious development.

Meera provides a more complex representation because she was professionally successful but was simultaneously criticized for her perceived emotional distance from her son. The drama therefore presents professional female independence as valuable but potentially incompatible with traditional maternal expectations.

The major categories applicable to the female characters were good woman, morally questionable/modern woman, romantic partner, mother, working woman, and victim.

12. Drama No. 12: *Bunty, I Love You* (2013)

Directed by: Siraj-ul-Haque Written by: Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar Cast: Saba Qamar, Numan Habib, Abid Ali

Overall Analysis of the Portrayal of Female Characters

Bunty, I Love You presents female characters primarily through the themes of beauty, romantic attachment, emotional dependency, marriage, and financial status. Daniya's character provides an example of how a woman may possess economic resources and social privilege while still being represented as emotionally dependent on male approval. From a feminist media perspective, such representation was significant because women's identities in television were frequently constructed around romantic and interpersonal relationships rather than independent social or professional achievements (McNeil, 1975; Tuchman, 1978).

13. Drama No. 13: *Rehaai* (2013)

Directed by: Mehreen Jabbar Written by: Farhat Ishtiaq Cast: Noman Ejaz, Maria was ti, Samina Peerzada, Saniya Shamshad

Critical Analysis of the Portrayal of Female Characters

Rehaai offers a substantially different representation of women from *Bunty, I Love You*. The drama addresses child marriage, domestic violence, patriarchal authority, economic dependency, forced marriage, and the preference for male children. Its female characters,

particularly Shamim, Shehnaz, and Kulsoom, were presented within oppressive social structures but were also given opportunities to demonstrate resilience and agency.

The drama was particularly important from a feminist perspective because it does not portray women solely as competitors for male attention. Instead, it establishes solidarity among women who experience different forms of patriarchal oppression. Feminist media scholarship emphasizes that representation becomes more empowering when women were shown as active participants who can resist, negotiate, and challenge social structures rather than merely suffering within them (Tuchman, 1978).

14. Drama No. 14: Digest Writer (2014)

Directed by: Mehreen Jabbar Written by: Madeha Shahid Cast: Saba Qamar, Gohar Rashid, Agha Ali

Critical Analysis of the Portrayal of Female Characters

Digest Writer presents a complex representation of female ambition, gender discrimination, marriage, professional achievement, sexual violence, and motherhood. Farida's character begins as an ambitious young woman who wants to become a writer, but her aspirations were repeatedly restricted by patriarchal expectations. The drama therefore illustrates the tension between women's personal ambitions and the social pressures associated with marriage and family.

The unequal treatment Farida receives compared with her brother was an important example of gender discrimination. Her brother was encouraged to pursue his ambition of becoming a doctor, whereas Farida's aspirations were not given the same recognition. This reflects a broader patriarchal assumption that boys should be prepared for professional careers while girls should prioritize marriage and family responsibilities. Such gendered expectations have historically contributed to the limited representation of women in professional and public roles (McNeil, 1975; Tuchman, 1978).

15. Drama No. 15: Gul-e-Rana (2014)

Directed by: Farooq Rind Written by: Samra Bukhari Cast: Sajal Aly, Feroze Khan, Janaan Hussain, Imran Ashraf

Critical Analysis of the Portrayal of Female Characters

Gul-e-Rana presents women primarily through the themes of marriage, family honour, romantic relationships, sacrifice, and victimization. Gul-e-Rana was initially depicted as an obedient and innocent young woman who becomes trapped in a relationship with Adeel, a manipulative and irresponsible man. Maria provides a contrasting representation of femininity because she was portrayed as fashionable, romantically obsessive, and willing to pursue a married man. The contrasting construction of Gul-e-Rana and Maria reflects a common binary in television representations in which women were divided into the "good woman" and the "bad woman." The good woman was traditionally associated with modesty, patience, sacrifice, and loyalty, whereas the bad woman was represented through sexuality, romantic pursuit, disobedience, or competition with another woman (McNeil, 1975; Tuchman, 1978).

Overall Assessment

Gule-Rana presents a strongly gendered distinction between acceptable and unacceptable femininity. Gul represents modesty, patience, sacrifice, and loyalty, whereas Maria represents romantic obsession, modernity, and moral transgression. Although Gul demonstrates courage by resisting Adeel at several points, the narrative ultimately places considerable emphasis on her capacity to forgive and care for him.

The ending, which hints at reconciliation between Gul and Adeel, further reinforces the conventional expectation that women should preserve marriage despite serious marital conflict. Rather than providing Gul with complete independence from the abusive relationship, the narrative leaves open the possibility of reunion. This weakens the emancipatory potential of her character and reinforces the cultural importance of marriage as the ultimate resolution for female characters.

16. Drama No. 16: *Tere Bagher* (2015)

Directed by: Owais Khan
Written by: Sarwat Nazir
Cast: Hareem Farooq, Saleem Sheikh, Farhan Ali Agha, Shakil, Zuhab Khan, Ismat Zaidi, Faisal Rehman

Critical Analysis of the Portrayal of Female Characters

Tere Bagher presents the story of Rabiya, a married woman whose life changes dramatically after her husband, Salman, was shot and falls into a coma. The drama explores women's vulnerability within patriarchal family structures, economic dependency, marriage, character assassination, widow-like social insecurity, and the importance of male protection. Although Rabiya experiences severe injustice, the narrative largely portrays her as dependent on male characters for protection, accommodation, financial assistance, and decision-making. Consequently, the drama reinforces several traditional gender stereotypes while simultaneously highlighting the vulnerability of women who lack independent economic resources.

Overall Assessment

Tere Bagher provides a largely traditional representation of femininity. Rabiya was caring, loyal, modest, and devoted to her family, but she lacks economic independence, professional identity, assertiveness, and decision-making authority. Her suffering was primarily caused by her dependence on male-controlled property and family structures.

The drama does highlight important issues concerning women's vulnerability, particularly property exploitation and character assassination. However, rather than transforming Rabiya into an empowered woman who challenges these structures, the narrative repeatedly places her in situations where male characters determine her circumstances. Her eventual restoration to Salman's life therefore provides emotional resolution but does not fundamentally challenge the patriarchal structure that caused her suffering.

17. Drama No. 17: *Ahista Ahista* (2015)

Directed by: Haseeb Hassan
Written by: Aliya Bukhari
Cast: Adnan Siddiqui, Mawra Hocane, Sarwat Gilani

Overall Assessment

Ahista Ahista presents a highly traditional model of female virtue. The drama rewards Hayaa's submission and patience while associating Sophie's assertiveness and modern lifestyle with

conflict. This creates a problematic gender binary in which the "good" woman was the one who accepts patriarchal arrangements and sacrifices personal interests, while the "bad" woman was the one who questions them.

The drama therefore demonstrates how television can reproduce gender ideology through both characterization and narrative consequences. Rather than treating both women as equally entitled to dignity and agency, the storyline privileges the woman who conforms to traditional expectations.

18. Drama No. 18: Mann Mayal (2016)

Directed by: Haseeb Hassan Written by: Samira Fazal Cast: Hamza Ali Abbasi, Maya Ali, Gohar Rasheed, Ayesha Khan

Overall Assessment

Mann Mayal provides a complicated mixture of female victimization and traditional femininity. Mannu experiences serious patriarchal oppression but was not given a strong professional or independent identity. Her ultimate resolution through marriage suggests that romantic partnership remains the primary source of female fulfillment.

Jeena's characterization further reinforces the good woman/bad woman binary. Mannu was rewarded for emotional loyalty and suffering, whereas Jeena was punished for assertiveness, romantic obsession, and manipulation. The drama therefore demonstrates how female characters can be granted emotional complexity while still remaining within conventional patriarchal narrative structures.

19. Drama No. 19: Bin Roye (2016)

Directed by: Shahzad Kashmiri Written by: Farhat Ishtiaq Cast: Mahira Khan, Humayun Saeed, Armeena Khan

Critical Analysis of the Portrayal of Female Characters

Bin Roye presents a complex portrayal of female desire, jealousy, sisterhood, grief, guilt, marriage, and emotional dependency. Sabah and Suman were constructed as contrasting female characters, although both ultimately remain closely connected to Irtiza and domestic relationships. Sabah was initially lively and expressive but becomes increasingly introverted and emotionally distressed after discovering that Irtiza loves Suman. Her emotional transformation demonstrates how romantic rejection can become the central source of female identity in television narratives.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how women were portrayed in Pakistani private television dramas aired on major entertainment channels such as Geo TV, ARY Digital, and Hum TV. Using feminist media theory and media representation theory as guiding frameworks, the findings reveal a complex and often contradictory pattern of representation. Consistent with the constructionist perspective of representation, media texts were found to actively construct meanings about femininity rather than simply reflect social reality (Gumusboga, 2026; Hall, 2020; Putri & Putri, 2026). Female characters were positioned within culturally familiar narratives that normalize sacrifice, obedience, and domestic devotion. Even when women were central to the storyline, their narrative arcs frequently revolve around marriage, family honor,

or romantic conflict. This supports the argument that media operates as a site where dominant gender ideologies were reproduced (Mammadov, 2026; Stam & Shohat, 2014). Even the serials were available on social media. The usage of social media applications and websites was spreading globally (Shahzad & Bilal, 2019). While these platforms provide ways of social interaction (Shahzad, Hashmi, et al., 2024).

The findings also confirm the persistence of binary oppositions in representation. Women were often depicted as either morally virtuous and submissive or rebellious and morally flawed. Such oppositional framing aligns with (Chauhan, 2025; Shohat & Stam, 1994; Stam & Shohat, 2014) argument that media relies on simplified categories to construct meaning, often reducing social complexity. The internet has enabled the viewers to view the serials virtually. The virtual connection was easily available via internet and the kind of social media platforms were easily accessible on laptop, tablet, or a mobile devices (Shahzad, Bhatti, et al., 2024). The dominance of these binaries reinforces what (Kompatsiaris et al., 2026; Tuchman, 2000; Tuchman et al., 1978) termed symbolic annihilation, where women's diverse identities were either trivialized or excluded. As the businesses have drastically affected in Pakistan in past years (Shahzad & Hashmi, 2023). The serial industry has also been affected. Unlike Facebook that motivates students (Shahzad, 2017b) other platforms for instance YouTube also provide detailed content related to the politics but this research was based on Facebook and political polarization (Shahzad & Rizvi, 2025) that can be further studied. The trends of virtual machines was increasing globally for wide spread of these kind of content (Shahzad et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

The combined findings reveal a complex landscape. Pakistani private television dramas simultaneously reinforce and negotiate patriarchal gender norms. On one hand, the prevalence of binary stereotypes, limited agency, and domestic confinement supports the argument that media functions as a tool of ideological reproduction. These portrayals sustain socially constructed hierarchies and limit the visibility of diverse female identities.

On the other hand, emerging narratives of resistance and professional empowerment indicate gradual transformation. As (de Barros Camilloto et al., 2026; Shohat & Stam, 2003) suggest, media texts were sites of struggle where dominant and alternative meanings coexist. The data confirms that while progress was visible, representation remains uneven. Female characters were increasingly central, yet their independence was often conditional. Empowerment narratives exist but frequently operate within culturally acceptable boundaries.

The results showed that there were the following problems:

- Persistent reliance on binary stereotypes.
- Limited but growing representation of female agency.
- Partial resistance narratives constrained by moral framing.
- Conditional empowerment tied to domestic identity.

These findings highlight the need for more nuanced portrayals that reflect the diversity and complexity of women's lived experiences. As feminist scholars argue, challenging reductive narratives was essential for media to become a space for equality rather than reinforcement of hierarchy (Adorno et al.; Marchand & Parpart, 1995).

Overall, the analysis confirms that Pakistani television dramas were powerful cultural texts that both mirror and shape gender ideology. The responsibility now lies with writers, producers, and media institutions to expand the spectrum of female representation and move beyond restrictive frameworks of womanhood.

RQ1. were core issues of Pakistani females projected through Pakistani private TV channel dramas?

The analysis demonstrates that Pakistani private television dramas do project several core issues experienced by women in Pakistani society, although these issues were not always presented from an empowering or feminist perspective. The selected dramas address issues including forced and arranged marriage, domestic violence, child marriage, marital rape, economic dependence, lack of decision-making power, motherhood, pressure to produce male children, divorce, widowhood, sexual harassment, character assassination, restrictions on women's mobility, unequal treatment within families, polygamy, women's sexuality, social expectations regarding modesty, and discrimination against working and modern women. For example, *Aurat aur Chaar Diwari* presents forced marriage, domestic violence, women's commodification, and restrictions on female autonomy through Zubaida's experience. Her father effectively exchanges her for money, while her husband physically and verbally abuses her. Similarly, *Rehaai* addresses child marriage, domestic violence, son preference, economic exploitation, and women's economic empowerment. Shamim's own experience of child marriage makes her sympathetic towards Kulsoom, demonstrating how women's experiences of oppression can create solidarity between generations. *Digest Writer* addresses gender discrimination within the family, restrictions on women's professional aspirations, marital rape, and women's struggle to maintain an identity beyond marriage. Farida initially possesses aspirations of becoming a writer, but her husband restricts her professional activities. Her eventual success as a writer was significant because it demonstrates female capability; however, the narrative simultaneously places considerable emphasis on her responsibilities as a wife and mother.

Similarly, *Mann Mayal* presents domestic violence, forced marriage, reproductive expectations, divorce, and women's economic and emotional dependence. Mannu was subjected to physical abuse and treated primarily as a reproductive figure within her marriage. *Tere Bagher* depicts women's vulnerability following the death or incapacitation of a husband, while Rabiya's displacement demonstrates the insecurity experienced by women whose economic and social status was dependent upon male family members. The dramas also expose the issue of male preference for sons. In *Rehaai*, was eem repeatedly mistreats Shehnaz and Kulsoom because they do not provide him with a male heir. Similarly, *Mera Saeen* presents an extreme example in which Malik Wajahat divorces women and forces abortions because of his obsession with having a son. Such narratives expose the cultural pressure placed upon women to reproduce according to male expectations. However, the representation of these issues was contradictory. Although the dramas identify genuine social problems, they frequently resolve them through marriage, male protection, forgiveness, sacrifice, or romantic reconciliation rather than through structural change. This distinction was important because representing oppression does not necessarily constitute an emancipatory representation. Feminist media scholarship argues that media can reproduce dominant ideological structures even when it appears to criticize them (Tuchman, 1978; van Zoonen, 1994).

Thus, the answer to RQ1 was yes, Pakistani private television dramas project many core issues faced by Pakistani women. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that these issues were frequently framed through patriarchal narratives in which women remain dependent on family, marriage, male protection, or sacrifice.

RQ2. How were female characters portrayed in terms of physical appearance?

The findings indicate that female characters were overwhelmingly presented according to conventional and narrowly defined standards of feminine beauty. Across the selected dramas, descriptions repeatedly emphasize fair complexion, slim or delicate bodies, long and silky hair, glowing faces, and traditionally feminine clothing. These characteristics were not merely visual details; they become part of the process through which female characters were categorized as desirable, respectable, innocent, immoral, or undesirable. For instance, characters such as Somia in *Manzil*, Kunj in *Dohri*, Rabiya in *Tere Bagher*, Mannu in *Mann Mayal*, Sabah and Suman in *Bin Roye*, Farida in *Digest Writer*, and Gul e Rana were repeatedly associated with fair skin, slim bodies, silky hair, and conventional Eastern clothing. Their physical attractiveness was frequently emphasized alongside their romantic desirability. The analysis also reveals a strong association between traditional clothing and positive femininity. Women wearing shalwar kameez, dupattas, bangles, and other culturally traditional clothing were more frequently constructed as respectable, innocent, loyal, and marriageable. In contrast, modern or Western clothing was repeatedly associated with morally questionable female characters. Sophie in *Ahista Ahista*, Maria in *Gul e Rana*, and other modern female characters were presented as more assertive or sexually independent, but their characteristics were often accompanied by negative moral judgments.

This pattern reflects what Goffman (1979) describes as the gendered presentation of women in media, where female bodies and appearances were carefully constructed to communicate femininity, attractiveness, submissiveness, and social status. Similarly, Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze helps explain how women's bodies may be positioned primarily for visual and heterosexual consumption. The analysis also identifies colorism and body standardization. Fairness was repeatedly associated with beauty and desirability, while unconventional physical appearances were rarely celebrated. Slimness was similarly treated as an ideal. This creates a restricted representation of female beauty and excludes women who do not conform to these standards.

Therefore, the answer to RQ2 was that female characters were predominantly represented through idealized beauty, slimness, fairness, youthful appearance, long hair, and culturally coded femininity. Physical appearance frequently becomes more important than professional achievements, intellectual capabilities, or individuality.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It was in the characteristics of a human to keep searching for new ways (Shahzad, 2017a) to improve the quality (Shahzad, 2019). While this study provides valuable insights, several areas require further exploration. First, future research could expand the timeframe to examine long-term changes in representation across decades. A historical comparison would allow researchers to assess whether current shifts were sustained trends or temporary experiments. Second, comparative studies between public and private television channels could reveal structural differences in content production and ideological framing. Third, audience

reception studies using in-depth interviews or focus groups could provide richer insight into how viewers interpret and negotiate gender portrayals. Although this study included survey responses, qualitative audience research would deepen understanding of interpretive processes. Many students in Pakistan were using these platforms for activities (Shahzad, 2020). The serials do effects the viewers. This research provided insights and enabled the objective of suggestion for the media to portray the women in a positive way.

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