

March 2019

## Representations of Women's Role in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis through Drama Serials

Anam Fatima

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fatima, Anam (2019). Representations of Women's Role in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis through Drama Serials. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(3), 3-16.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss3/2>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

## Representations of Women's Role in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis through Drama Serials

By Anam Fatima<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The concept of honour and the resulting discourses have always affected women's lives in Pakistan. This paper will utilize Butler's theory of performativity and insights from feminist film theory and women's history in Pakistan to critique and evaluate women's representation in Pakistani popular cultural texts, and thus engage with the politics of gender in Pakistan. The methodological tools of content analysis and discourse analysis will be used to investigate the central research question that is: to what extent does the representation of women's roles in contemporary Pakistani drama serials include traditionalist discourses of honour?' It will thus examine that 'how' women are represented in Pakistani soap operas or drama serials and what it means to be a 'honourable' woman. This will reveal that despite modernization and increased female education and labor participation, honour discourses still continue to be the most dominant feature of a woman's life on screen and in pop culture. Research shows that some of the most prominent concepts that are influenced by honour discourses include marriage, domestic violence, economic roles, labor participation, silencing of victims of sexual harassment or rape and even one's religious standing. The study shows how important it is to investigate these cultural texts with gendered lenses and gain a deeper understanding of the challenges women in this part of the world face.

*Keywords:* Honor, Domestic Violence, Religion, Marriage, Drama

### Introduction

The concept that the construction of gender in media representations and cultural discourses is a political act implicating power relations has been widely acknowledged since the second wave feminists' slogan of describing personal as the political (Savigny and Warner 9). Popular cultural texts are now seen as instrumental in the production of 'common sense' and the 'everyday knowledge' about politics (Weldes 119; Steans 140) and thus, pop culture becomes one of the important sites which must be subjected to analysis in order to comprehend politics and 'keep the world functioning as it does' (Rowley 362). The mutual constitution of popular culture and other discourses is seen as intertextuality, with gender being one of the key logics through which this intertextuality operates (Rowley 391) and hence, the connection between 'gender' and popular culture is 'extricable, pervasive and complex' (Milestone and Meyer 1).

It is however, noteworthy that most feminist film theory and gender analysis in popular culture has been done keeping in mind Anglo-American audiences and production processes (Atakav 28). Enloe's recommendation to examine the 'silences, margins and exclusions' and not

---

<sup>1</sup> Anam focuses on politics of gender and identity in Pakistan, popular cultural texts and Pakistan's history. She is a full-time lecturer at LUMS Lahore and a visiting faculty at FCC University Lahore. Anam has previously served as a research assistant at Politics and International Studies Department, University of Warwick, UK from where she got her MA in International Relations. She can be reached at a.fatima.quill@gmail.com.

disregard large parts of world's population and their activities in the accounts of 'world politics' provides the inspiration for this study (Enloe 127). This paper seeks to engage with the politics of gender in Pakistan, by critiquing and evaluating women's representation in Pakistani popular culture. The primary research question can be summarized as: 'To what extent does the representation of women's roles in contemporary Pakistani popular culture include traditionalist discourses of honour?' Butler's performativity theory will be the primary theoretical framework and post-structural insights from politics and film studies will be utilised to observe that how are women represented in Pakistani pop culture.

Honour based violence against women is a grave issue in the country. When Chinoy, in collaboration with the HBO films made a documentary regarding this issue and won an academy award, not only had she provoked the government to be suddenly all ears about women's new honour crime bill, but she also attracted criticism by the Pakistani audience who did not like a woman making a film in collaboration with western directors, about women being killed or mistreated in Pakistan and thus bring 'shame' to the country (Maher, 'Oscar Nominated Documentary'). This speaks volumes about the increased need to give attention to media, not just with honour crimes in mind but the larger woman empowerment question. This work is an original contribution to this area of research because, though there is an increasing willingness on behalf of the policy makers to include women in larger roles than before in the public realm, there is a clear lack of space for realizing popular culture's importance in the process. The study thus aims to do the first exploratory step in this regard: recognize, analyse and understand 'how' women are represented mostly in this terrain.

## Literature Review and Key Concepts

Popular culture is considered a site of political contestation where a set of ideas-ideologies and discourses are competed over and the dominant discourses are adapted and reproduced, challenged and resisted (Hall 56-90; Milestone and Meyer 5). Feminists argue that this politics of cultural media is gendered, and the construction of women in the media is a political act and is indicative of unequal power relations. Thus, power relations are being exercised in our cultural discourse; that ultimately means that similar relations of power are transmitted through formal politics and through institutions of the state (Savigny and Warner, 10).

### *Butler's Performativity Theory*

Initially, as noted by Simon De Beauvoir, and then later picked up by Goffman and again later on by Judith Butler, was the post structuralist notion of seeing gender as a performance. The fact that ideas of gender appropriate behaviour shift across time and cultures is seen as proof that gender is changeable and is not a 'universal' or a natural concept (Milestone and Meyer 12). For Goffman, gender performances are conventionalized portrayals of a culture's idealization of femininity and masculinity (Goffman, 10), but as Milestone and Meyer (12-13) points out, his work indicates gender as a conscious, optional identity which one only performs when one decides to do so and therefore underestimates, if not excludes, the impact of social structures on it. Gender is an on-going routine that is deeply connected with the social and doesn't require continuous conscious choice making (West and Zimmerman).

Combining psychoanalytical feminist thought with it, Judith Butler further argued that gender is, "a process in which the 'body' is objectified in discourse that takes for granted the reality of sexual difference and inequality" (Stein 144). She talks about performative constructs rather

than performance (Butler, "Gender Trouble"). While not denying the materiality/physicality of the body, she, doesn't see the material (body) and discursive domains as totally separate categories. For her, the material (body) never completely escapes the process by which it is signified. The identity 'I' doesn't exist prior to the discursive construction. In the process of construction, discourses of the body replace the sex by gender (Butler, "Bodies that Matter"). Thus, for her human society isn't made of two sexes that are socially afforded masculine and feminine roles, but these sexed binaries of male and female are deeply rooted in the practices of language construction—that is, in discourses and narratives (Stean 33). Binaries persist not because they are created on a foundation in the pre-existing natural world—but because they are continually being produced in language and discourses as binary opposites. It therefore highlights the significance of feminist project to deconstruct, destabilize and undermine the binary sex-gender constructions (Butler, "Bodies that Matter"; Stean 33). Therefore, for post structural feminists, gender isn't a fixed category and seems relatively stable only because language and social institutions continue to reproduce the preferred meaning.

### **Film Theory and Feminism**

Feminist film perspectives aim to problematize and question the relationship of aesthetics to politics and culture (Kaplan, "Feminism and Film" 1). Mulvey's famous essay 'visual pleasure and narrative cinema' used psychoanalysis to critically examine that where and how is the fascination of film reinforced by the fascinations already existing within an individual and with the society that affects him (Mulvey 6). According to her, the mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. Woman, in order to achieve a certain 'to be looked at ness', is presented in the films to have strong erotic effects and thus 'holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire' (Mulvey 40). Furthermore, a woman is devoid of any individuality and gains attention only through her capacity to invoke feelings of love, fear or concern for her in the male hero. The male characteristics however, are not sexual and they are represented as being powerful, complete, decisive, and egoistic and can get things done (Mulvey 40).

The post structuralist methods involved in addressing aesthetical questions of how meaning was produced in film, gave little attention to the social contexts and theories about unconscious processes that account for certain manner in which a woman's representation is used as a sign within a film (Kaplan, "Feminism and Film"). Taking this up, Cowie contended that feminist film theorists, when commenting on the stereotypical representations of women in the film, assume that the category of women is not seen as being produced within the film, but drawn from a general placing of women outside the realm of film and in the society in general. She argues that films are a system of representation that is a site of the production of definitions, which are 'neither unique and independent of, nor simply reducible to other practices defining the position of women in society' (Cowie 49).

She examines Levi Strauss' notion of kinship that sees women as a 'sign' - a sign that is communicated by men. He argues that in kinship, women have a certain fundamental value for the community because of their exchangeability-like other essential commodities that makes them into a sign (Claude). Cowie, however argues that: "the values of the terms in circulation in a film are simply not fixed 'in a patriarchal culture' which is outside of the film. The film itself is part of the operation of the 'fixing of the values'" (Cowie 64). If the two aspects of seeing women as a sign and the question of representing them are kept separate, 'there will be no danger of denouncing

of the sign as an inadequate representation/significance of the real object woman' (Cowie 64).

### *Traditional Honour Discourses in Pakistan*

The concept of honor in this paper is addressed from the perspective and relevance to Pakistan. Atakav defines honour as:

“Honour is typically perceived to be residing in the body and sexuality of women; protecting this honour and policing female activities relating to marriage, sexuality or love are perceived to be the primary roles of the male or the male members of a family or a community. This idea of regulating women's lives, experiences, and sexuality are common in patriarchal discourses surrounding a society” (Atakav 52).

Furthermore, defiance of the set traditional and communal rules and suspicion, allegation or proof of sexual impropriety by the victim can get her killed or punished by her immediate family (Ahmed, “Pakistan: Honor Killings of Girls and Women”). In this gendered social construction, honor appears as a male trait and shame as a female trait (Gilmore).

In Pakistan, the rules governing marriage, family, inheritance, and divorce-most of which pertain to women are thought to be in the domains of religious authorities and thus, when women raise their voices regarding any of these laws, it is the religious clergy and established order that they are confronting (Rouse, “Shifting Body Politics”). The continued presence and the power of Islamic ideologues, both at the state level and at the cultural level who do not shy away from dictating what ‘appropriate’ roles should the women be playing in society, situates the ‘honour discourse’ in a larger religious context, that makes the concept of honour very pertinent to the lives of women in Pakistan. Bhasin asserts the basic needs of the women are not only linked to the issues of class and patriarchy (as proposed by western feminists), but also, to religion and community. (Rouse et.al, “Gendered Struggles”, 11). Furthermore, not only does religion affect personal lives of women, it might be used as an effective political tool to ensure their subordination (Mernissi 6).

Rouse divides the impact of religion into two parts, the first one being the religious discourses as constructing gender on the level of culture while the second one being the national polity. It is the first (cultural) realm that informs notions of sexuality, marriage norms, family laws, and appropriate work roles; these notions are seldom subjected to critical analysis and are taken for granted as being the way things are done. Yet, it is precisely here, she argues, that men and women socialize as individual agents historically and it is these continuities, along with discourses and institutions supporting them that must be challenged, if systematic change is to be achieved in women's social status (Rouse et.al, “Gendered Struggles”17). All of these notions are in turn influenced by the traditionalist discourses of honour.

In traditional discourses of honour, the vision of a Pakistani woman's sexuality is one of being protected from the outside world where the woman is at risk. The honour and shame of the females of the household isn't just a matter of their individualism but affects the kin and community as a whole. Women live under the constraints of ‘Purdah’- and this signifies a separation between the activities of men and women (Weiss 60). Jeffery argues that the concept of Purdah captures the limited power women enjoy in the traditional society, however, in the contemporary times, more and more women are entering the work force, especially ones from the elite class (Jeffery; Rouse, “Shifting Body Politics” 20).

One of the last things to note about Pakistani women would be that it is a very diverse group, and that Pakistan is, by many standards, speedily modernizing. It is however, what Naeem Mirza terms as 'a fractured modernity'. While there are many NGO's advancing the right of women and governments have also passed some landmark laws, the structural change is not much and the Islamist leaders still enjoy an indisputable space (Weiss).

## Methodology

The methodological tools of content analysis and discourse analysis will be used in this paper to investigate the central research question: to what extent does the representation of women's roles in contemporary Pakistani popular culture include traditionalist discourses of honour?' It will thus examine that 'how' through an assessment of the representation of women in Pakistani soap operas or dramas/serials. Although 'popular culture' would include a wide range of sources, it is out of the scope of a single study to encompass all and hence the focus is only on dramas.

The sources selected are seven drama serials televised on Pakistani media channels. All of the seven samples chosen are within the top twenty Pakistani dramas according to the IMDB rankings and are all recent productions (2010-2015) set in contemporary times, except the drama serial 'Dastaan'(produced in 2010), which is set in 1947, and narrates the events of partitioning of India and the birth of Pakistani state (Imdb.com; Dastaan).

The sampling method used for this study was twofold. After the initial sampling out of the top ten drama serials of the country according to the IMDB rankings, the sample selected was subjected to 'relevance sampling' based on the perceived contribution towards the answering the central research question (Krippendorff). Sample A constitutes the following top four serials based on IMDB rankings (imdb.com): *DiyareDil* (2005), *Humsafar* (2011-12), *Meri Zaat Zare Benishan* (2009), and *Khuda aur Mohabbat* (2011). Sample B contains the following three serials chosen because of their relevance to the topic i.e. honor discourses surrounding sexual violence: *Sangat* (2015-16), *Chup Raho* (2014-15), *Dastaan* (2010). Thus, both aspects of prominence and relevance are captured in sampling, to ensure a representative sample and increase the accuracy of the study.

## Content Analysis

The serials were organized under a coding framework according to the set research questions that sought to identify common patterns in the roles of women in the set texts. The first inquiry by content analysis was to find out whose voice was present in the serials. There is a strong presence of feminine voice in the drama serials of both sample A and B. Voice was counted as the number of times the camera captures the mind and actions of the female roles or captures them narrating the background story. Women were in focus in all of the seven texts with 71% of them giving more voice to the female protagonist than the male ones. In the two instances (29%) where the male protagonist occupied a stronger voice, both in sample A, both had a positive role in the serial. Therefore, unlike females' voices being stifled in real life (Jalal 77), the texts of the drama serials tend to be overwhelmingly female driven with a strong feminine voice, focusing on women's feelings, thoughts and roles.

All of the dramas were then coded for 'honour/shame' instances, defined as dialogues or scenes that represent woman's honour being at stake. It is indicated by the explicit use of the word

'izat'. All seven serials had 'existence' of such an instance, however it fluctuated in frequency within each individual serial and between the samples A & B. Sample B becomes inconsequential here as the texts in it are chosen on these very instances and therefore, the presence of this notion is the main idea driving the plot in all three of the serials in B. In sample A, three of the four (75%) of the serials had such instances more than 10 times in each serial. All of these instances were represented as being loss or gain of honour not only for the woman herself, but also for the family and the male patriarch, due to a woman's actions or things that happened to her. Two of the serials (50%), however also discussed the inherent honour of males as originating from something other than a woman's role like monetary status or from being a moral human being who behaves appropriately in the name of family honour.

Feminist film theorists also note that there is a greater tendency to portray women as the primary victims in the serials (Clover 237) and such a tendency was also found here. This was determined by the portrayal of a female facing injustice, violence or abuse and needing mental or physical saving by a male protagonist. All seven serials (100%) represent at least one female character being the 'victim' for at least one instance; however, this portrayal too, differs in intensity and frequency. Comparatively, males are shown to be victims by extension of the woman being victimized-such as the dishonoured husband, lover, son or father, in four out of seven serials (57% of summation of A&B). Furthermore, in two serials (28%), male leads are victimized by the patriarch of the family on accounts of inappropriate behaviour and on the failure to uphold the family name and honour. Whether or not a woman is not only a victim but also a survivor and how their role transitions in some cases from being victims to survivors exerting agency, will be analysed in in the discourse analysis.

The serials were then coded to determine portrayal of physical violence against women including rape and other forms of domestic abuse. All serials in sample B had instances of rape with 66% of them also portraying other forms of domestic violence like beating and locking the girl up. In sample A, 75% of the serials had violent scenes with, 50% of them being beating and 25% of them being rape. In all of these, the perpetrators were family members, with one of them being the mother in law of the girl. Furthermore, of the serials that showed 'beating', it was done in the context of honour crimes. The girl accused of being characterless had to be punished. It is important to note how physical violence against women is intertwined with honour discourses in drama serials. While rape symbolizes dishonour for the girl and renders her unusable by any other honourable male, physical abuse and threats to kill are done to restore the lost honour.

Following this, the serials were coded to determine in how many instances the female victim forgives her oppressor or fails to label the oppressor as one, as opposed to not forgiving, active allegation or filing a lawsuit. 57% of the seven serials analysed, had female protagonists who either forgave their oppressors or rested in the idea that God shall avenge them in His own ways. Of the three cases (43%), portraying some sort of retaliation, one oppressor gets shot, one meets his fate in a mental hospital and only one goes behind the bars. The reluctance to punish the oppressor often arises from the fact that women or women's sympathizers often refuse to talk about 'rape' or sexual violence as it results in honour being taken away and instruct the female to remain silent. Three of the seven serials include women's family instructing her to be silent about any sexual violence perpetrated. Three others reject the dishonoured woman completely and disown her instantly in order to restore the honour of the family.

The serials were then coded to analyse the economic conditions and roles of women. All seven serials portrayed the female lead roles as being economically dependent on the males of the household and themselves being either housewives or students studying under the financial

sponsorship of their parents or husbands. It is important to note that except Bano from *Dastaan-a* historic serial set in 1947, all the positive female leads are educated to some degree (*Dastaan*). In five out of seven (71.4%) they are housewives, and in two serials (28.5%), one of the positive lead roles is a student. In addition to the majority women being housewives, the notion of 'respectability' of profession is heavily evident which will be further elaborated in the CDA.

Lastly, serials were coded to analyse the relation between women and religion in the serials. This was analysed by the number of times a female lead role prays to God verbally or physically as compared to their male counterparts. Women were captured praying in six of the seven serials (85.7%), while men were only pictured praying in two (28.5%). Two of the serials (28%), basically showed both males and females praying to Allah, which means that there is no instance of only the male praying in a serial.

Overall, the content analysis reveals that most of the serials, whether they are specifically dealing with violence against women (sample B), or are simple generic productions (sample A), contain elements that reflect or relate to the honour discourses in Pakistani society. Critical Disclosure Analysis (CDA) will now be used to examine the organization and structure of these serials and also examine the wider socio-political factors that relate to it.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

All the texts were analysed to recognize some key themes dominant at the expense of marginalizing or silencing others. One of such theme was women's marriage. An unmarried girl is supposed to uphold the family honour by being virtuous and marrying someone of their family's choice. The majority of the marriages portrayed were arranged with the exception of one serial that showed a girl marrying her lover against her brother's wishes and against his parent's wishes as well (*Diyar-e-Dil*). The man's father who is the head of the family, refuses to accept the girl as a valid member of his family, and taunts him that 'how much 'shareef' (virtuous) she is, is very evident by the circumstances she agreed to marry you in-that is, complete absence of your elders'. Her family and brother also disown the girl (*Diyar-e-Dil*).

Similarly Eiman, a pious woman, refuses to speak to Hammad who is in love with her and is unable to convey her true feelings to her father for the fear of 'sinning' or 'dishonouring her father'. Sensing danger, her father announces a quick arranged marriage for her that she dare not argue against and proudly informs her after her acceptance that 'daughters like her, were the crown in the heads of father and others'. He also follows this with a prayer to God wishing her a good marital life (*Khuda aur Mohabbat*). Thus, there is an element of the prayer being followed only because the daughter upheld the father's honour, while he turns a blind eye to his daughter's stress and deteriorating health.

Furthermore, the issue of marriage is intricately linked with the issue of honour-based violence. If a girl decides to have a love affair or is adamant on marrying someone of her choice, like Salma from *Sangat*, her father longs to get his hands on her and kill her to restore his honour (*Sangat*). It is interesting to note that even in the case of Eiman, the virtuous, obedient daughter, her father informs her lover that, 'if you continue to seek her hand in marriage, I will be left no choice but to kill both my girls to save their honour' (*Khuda aur Muhabbat*). Saba, from *MZZBN*, meets a terrible fate at the hands of her uncle who beats her up and then weds her off to a low class fifty-year-old worker after her 'reputation' and 'character' was allegedly maligned by her actions (*MZZBN*). Honour based violence, is thus portrayed as a likely outcome mostly in the context of love affairs or marriage, whether or not the girl is proved to be guilty.

Portrayal of marriageable woman in all serials, using adjectives like 'beautiful', 'innocent', 'simplistic', 'honest', 'God fearing', 'obedient', family oriented' and 'humble' constructs a



gendered femininity that dominates so much that anyone not conforming to it is categorised as problematic or 'dishonourable'. Where as in western pop culture a woman's representations include objectification in sexual ways, in this case, women are objectified as being the holders of modesty, dignity, religiosity, and beauty that places them on a pedestal so high with or without their consent. It is a part of the Muslim society's "specific vision of female sexuality" (Mernissi 15). The represented femininity in these serials thus defines women via their appearance and obedience to honour discourses while invests men with character that reaffirms their intellectual superiority and thus legitimizes their dominance (Milestone and Meyer 96). Therefore, both cultures make the woman what the male gaze wants to envision (Kaplan, 'Feminism and Film' 466).

Moreover, women are only significant in films in how they make the man feel and this is exactly what these serial portrayals tend to achieve by painting that simplistic minded girl (Mulvey). This makes a women's self-identity relational to her kin (husband, father, brother, children etc) and contributes to hold a culture that denies full self hood and individuality to women (Simonds).

Following from Butler, texts 'perform' gender and if a text continues to replicate a certain location and tradition at a higher frequency, it indicates a motivated choice (Butler, "Excitable Speech"; Butler, "Gender Trouble"). There certainly are other significant topics in a girl's life other than marriage, that might inspire a plot but there is no representation of that in pop culture. By making marriage the 'issue', the other aspects of a woman's life (like education, childhood, nutrition, maternal health, spiritual health other than religion), are deemed as non-existent and hence 'non-issues'. This reduces the agency and space given to women in real public space; it also applies different religious and social standard to men and women that not only embolden the males but also, make the wider audience including women accept this norm.

Another prominent representation in these serials is a woman's role as a mother. Pakistani serials invest mothers with a lot of socio-cultural wisdom and a position that is undisputed. A daughter's mother is her 'secret keeper' who would stand beside her if something were to happen to her daughter (like rape in *Sangat*) and would ensure that her daughter's honour is safe by instructing her to remain silent. 'Do you think your husband will ever accept you back if he knows you were raped?' asked Ayesha's mother when Ayesha wanted to inform her husband that a robber raped her (*Sangat*) The mothers yield to the patriarchal honour discourses and protect their daughters while standing amidst them, not trying to find a way outside those discourses.

However, there was not a single case where a mother would encourage her daughter's love affair or help her if her daughter has been 'characterless'. In *MZZBN*, Saba's mother refuses to believe her daughter's pleas of innocence and watches her being slapped to unconsciousness by the head of the family on accusation of adultery, blaming Saba for 'dishonouring me and my teachings' and tells her that 'you have committed a sin against Allah, He will never forgive you!' (*MZZBN*). The way a daughter's mother affirms to the traditional honour discourses and stands powerless in front of the heads of the family even though knowing her child's innocence, (like in *Sangat* and *Chup Raho*), takes away the usual courageous and 'fighter' image of motherhood that appears in some other cases. A mother might fight for her daughter's education, but she would not be able to fight if it's something against 'honour'. Also, occasional references to religion imply that how when once a girl is deemed 'characterless', she has not only transgressed against her family but also against God. There is a constant theme of religious reference that is described in the CDA that speaks of religion's powerful influence.

A man's mother is a bolder figure who gazes down at the daughter-in-law or the potential

daughter-in-law with a scrutinizing look, ensuring that the incoming girl doesn't threaten the honour or name of the family and does not question, at her authority in any way. Williams (478) observes that some 'women films' debase and devalue the figure of the mother while the institution of motherhood is venerated; this holds true for some popular dramas in Pakistan. Even when the sons discover their mother's evil intentions, they do not vilify their mothers in any way or seek to avenge them for their wrongdoing, because the institution of motherhood is too big to be disrespected no matter what. Therefore, mothers ensure that any resistance by their children is transformed into conformity by virtue of these honour discourses, both for women and men.

CDA also seeks to recognize the assumptions and silences in the texts and one of the key assumptions made in these seven texts is regarding the economic roles of women. Firstly, any education given to girls should be motivated by the notion to make better family makers, not individuals who can make their own decisions. 'We sent you to university to study, not having love affairs', informs Ruhi's sister after Ruhi expressed her liking for a boy; likewise, Saba's and Khirad's decisions to pursue university education were cursed by their families as being wrong ones and reasons of emboldening the girls enough to be 'characterless' (Diyar-e-Dil; Humsafar; MZZBN). Thus, while women's education is considered important, there is a certain honour discourse associated with this as well that limits true empowerment and does not allow the woman to make her own decisions.

Moreover, of the women shown to be working, there is an implicit understanding of 'necessity' being their motivation to work instead of a career drive, indicating that paid work is a means to an end and only secondary to women's primary roles as carers, wives or mothers (Milestone and Meyer 100). Ayesha's mother in *Sangat* and Khird in *Humsafar* were teachers while Saba from *MZZBN* had to serve as a housemaid to make ends meet. All three had no male relative to depend upon and it was the lack of it that made them seek work, despite being educated. Additionally, this necessity is coupled with the need of respectability in one's profession as well. With respect to women working in Pakistan, Rouse points out that: "a discourse exists around women and work that distinguishes respectable work from non-respectable work" (Rouse, "Shifting Body Politics" 27). A profession is respectable if it is empathetic and has segregated and safe avenues to work, like teaching. (Khattak 46). Most of the positive working lead roles women are teachers who are also conforming to other aspects of traditional honour discourses. This, therefore, does not constitute true empowerment because there is an element of 'retreatism' (Negra), which keeps telling the working woman that in order to achieve her life's purpose, she must get back to her original duty of being a caregiver and raising a family and her work is always portrayed as a second priority.

Lastly, representations of working women like Fareeda and Sara in *Humsafar* are not only rare but also negative (*Humsafar*). These characters are problematic and unfulfilled (Ticknell et al) and fail to deal with their children's feelings. It is as if working women 'lose their warm qualities' (Kaplan, 'The Case of Missing Mothers' 477) and end up meeting a terrible fate if they do not recognize the importance of family. Interestingly, these characters also dress in western clothes—a dress code perceived to be 'liberal' and 'irreligious'. Thus, the negative woman is evil and western as compared to the typical religious and eastern heroine.

The above-mentioned assumptions lead to the detection of one of the silences of these texts; a lack of any story line that portrays females in economically independent roles or pursuing professions like engineering, military or scientific discovery, with normal family lives or with a happy lifestyle that doesn't include family. Though such stories are relatively less, however they are not rare; 25% of the female population participates in the work force and there seems to be

very little representation to reflect this (Data.worldbank.org, “Labour Force Participation Rate”). It is not only a denial of roles women are playing in real life, but also a way of casting away light from discussing issues they might face at work like lower pay, sexual discrimination or harassment. Parker contends that discourses in a society relate to and mutually reinforce one and other (Parker); by representing women in the traditionalist ways in the face of globalization, the pop culture is reducing the space to discuss the issues of working women and recognize them as legitimate part of the country’s social and cultural realm.

Because the samples were chosen on the basis of ‘rankings’ and ‘relevance’, this also draws our attention to the fact that audience like watching women in traditional roles and thus, the issue of subjects in CDA. Parker contends how giving attention to subjects i.e. consumers of the texts, is a vital aspect of CDA (Parker). Following from the active audience theory, power is shifted to the subjects engaging with cultural texts with a ‘interpretive resistance’ (Croteau and Hoynes) and this entails that the audience may deconstruct media discourses to resist and reject the dominant messages or simply interpret them in an alternative way (Milestone and Meyer 155). However, factors shaping the audience responses are not simply individual but socially patterned because individuals are part of interpretive communities and stand in broadly similar social conditions which result in them interpreting representations in similar ways (Kitzinger 162). Thus, traditional stories of honour portraying women in traditional roles maintain an implicit assumption that the subjects (who are Muslim and Pakistani) understand, believe and resonate with these discourses. Hence, it is also commercially viable to produce these dramas because they sell as indicated by the high ratings. It is also important here to note that the serials employ an honour discourse that views all women facing similar problems despite their different social locations and class, as being similar and as inherently being family makers.

Therefore, while performance of gender is not completely free as it is constrained by already existing social frames (Brickell 25), there will be no change if there is no alternative discourse being produced and women continue to be subordinated. The assumption of the above-explained subjectivity can limit the motivation to produce alternate stories. There has to be an alternate story about women and diversification of representation in order to strengthen the female voice and question in the society that shall then seek to impact and broaden the social frames of the audience as well.

Tonkiss and Parker both emphasize the recognition of contradictions within the texts (Tonkiss; Parker). Of the prevalent honour discourses, one of the contradictions is produced while addressing the rape victim question; for example, in *Sangat*. While it portrays a rape victim transforming into a survivor, the fact that the rapist is also the hero, increases the space for men’s forgiveness while at the same time constricts the avenues of the girl’s effort to bring the rapist to accountability (*Sangat*). Though the text portrays a husband who decides to be with Ayesha despite initially disowning her (which is itself a departure from the traditionalist notions of honour), the fact that there is so much more empathy for the villain’s problems in the actions of the characters, including the victims’ mother, provides a very contradictory message. The drama shows that the villain goes around freely, vindicating himself of all guilt, and gets support from religious friends who tell him that God forgives every sin. By the time he is shot dead by Ayesha’s husband, he has managed to ‘come to the right path’. Thus, while the text does push the borders of the discourse by putting forth the idea of an innocent wife who should be accepted as a valid member of the family despite being raped, the complete non-accountability offered to the villain simply produces the idea that men can get away with things both physically and spiritually.

Dastaan from sample B signifies another chapter of women’s political life that has been

kept silent. It portrays the notion of women's bodies being symbolic of community's honour and how during the riots, Muslims and Hindus violated each other's females in order to cause shame (Frischmann). Bano's brother ordered his mother to kill his sister but she failed to do so and Bano was raped (Dastaan). This is the only story produced about partition that envisions women as victims and bearers of honour of Muslim society, and there is not a single production ever made that might address lives of prominent Muslim women who were politically active during the partition. The sacrifice of honour takes precedence over any political activism and Butalia's 'outspoken, powerful women in their struggle of liberation' are thoroughly missing from the narratives (Butalia 1). Though such cases were lesser than the average women like the one portrayed in Dastaan, the total absence of these narratives encourages the question that why is the frame of popular culture still adherent to traditional roles and why there has been no alternative view of womanhood with regards to Pakistan's identity but that of the one needing protection.

Though CDA does not make claims to truth and only persuades (Parker), it has attempted to show that how by resorting to honour discourses, mainstream representation of women's roles in Pakistani serials, naturalizes women's roles as bearers of honour whether in society (marriage, education) economics or history.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show 'how' women are represented in Pakistani drama serials and to what extent their roles on screen adhere to the prevalent honour discourses of the society and thus engaged with politics of gender in Pakistan. Results show that almost all aspects of a woman's life—personal, social, religious, economic and political—continue to be influenced by the mainstream honour discourses and therefore, contribute to the construction of a specific kind of a femininity on screen. Greater gender parity has a prerequisite of talking about the issue on all levels before doing something practical about it and popular culture can become one of the most important arenas to kick start new conversations about women's roles.

## Works Cited

- Ahmed, Leila. "Pakistan: Honour Killings of Girls and Women." *Amnesty International*, 1999. Accessed August 15, 2016.  
<<https://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA33/018/1999/en/9fe83c27-e0f1-11dd-be39-2d4003be4450/asa330181999en.pdf>>
- Atakav, Eylem. 'Honour is everything for Muslims'? *Vendetta Song*, Filmic Representation, Religious Identity and Gender Politics in Turkey in Savigny, Heather, and Helen Warner. *The Politics of Being a Woman Feminism, Media and 21st Century Popular Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Brickell, C. "Masculinities, Performativity, and Subversion: A Sociological Reappraisal." *Men and Masculinities* 8, no. 1 (2005), pp 24-43.
- Butalia, Urvashi. "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition." *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 17 (1993): WS12-S24.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, London, Routledge. 1993.  
Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.  
Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Chup Raho. (Remain Silent). Directed by Yasir Nawaz. Pakistan: ARY Digital, 2014-2015. Accessed August 15, 2016.
- Claude, Lévi-Strauss, Von Sturmer John Richard, James Harle Bell, and Rodney Needham. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship = (Les Structures élémentaires De La Parenté)*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
- Clover, Carol J. *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Edited by Sue Thornham. New York: New York University Press, 1999. pp: 235-250.
- Cowie, Elizabeth. "Woman as a Sign." In *Feminism and Film*. Edited by E. Ann, Fiske, John. *Television Culture*. London: Methuen, 1989.
- Croteau, David, and William Hoynes. *Media Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2003.
- Dastaan*. (A Tale). Directed by Haisaam Hussain. Produced by Momina Duraid. Pakistan: Hum TV, 2010. Accessed July 15, 2016.
- Data.worldbank.org. "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15 ) (modelled ILO Estimate)." . Accessed August 14, 2016.
- Diyar-e-Dil*. (The Abode of the Heart). Directed by Haseeb Hassan. Produced by Momina Duraid. Pakistan: Hum TV, 2015. Accessed August 15, 2016.
- Enloe, C. 'Margins, Silences and bottom Rungs: How to overcome the Underestimation of power in the Study of International Relations' in S. Smith, K.Booth, and M. Zalewski. *International Theory: Positivism and beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. pp: 126-202.
- Frischmann, Nina Ellis. *Silence Revealed: Women's Experiences during the Partitioning of India*, 2010.  
<[https://www.academia.edu/611322/Silence\\_Revealed\\_Womens\\_Experiences\\_during\\_the\\_Partition\\_of\\_India](https://www.academia.edu/611322/Silence_Revealed_Womens_Experiences_during_the_Partition_of_India)>. Web. 27 April 2014.
- Gilmore, David D. *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*. Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1987.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondworth: Penguin Books, 1959.

- Hall, Stuart. 'The Rediscovery of Ideology: Return of The Repressed in Media Studies', in *Culture, Society, and the Media*. Edited by Gurevitch, Michael. London: Methuen, 1982. pp: 56-90.
- Humsafar. (Companion). Directed by Sarmad Khoosat. Produced by Momina Duraid. Pakistan: Hum Tv, 2011-2013. Accessed September 15, 2016.
- Imdb.com. Accessed September 15, 2016. <<https://www.imdb.com>>
- Jalal, Ayesha. *Women, Islam and the State*. Edited by Deniz Kandiyoti. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991.
- Jeffery, Patricia. *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah*. London: Zed Press, 1979.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. "Introduction" In *Feminism and Film*. Edited by E. Ann Kaplan, pp 466-78. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. "The Case of Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's Stella Dallas." In *Feminism and Film*. Edited by E. Ann Kaplan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. pp 466-78.
- Khattak, Shabana Shamaas Gul. "Teaching Professionalism and the Feminisation Debate in Pakistan." *American Journal of Educational Research* 2.12A (2014), pp. 45-53.
- Khuda Aur Muhabbat*. (God and Love). Directed by Anjum Shehzad. Produced by Javeria Saud. Pakistan: Geo Entertainment, 2011. Accessed August 15, 2016.
- Kitzinger, Jenny, 'Resisting the message: the extent and limits of media influence'. In *The Circuit of Mass Communication: Media strategies, Representation and Audience Reception in AIDS Crisis*. Edited by D. Miller, J. Kitzinger, K. Williams and P. Beharrell. London: Sage. 1998.
- Krippendorff, K. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*, London: SAGE, 2004.
- Maher, Sanam. "Oscar-nominated Documentary about "honor Killings" Exposes Filmmaker to Witch Hunt." *Women in the World in Association with The New York Times WITW*. February 24, 2016. Accessed August 10, 2016. <<http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/02/24/oscar-nominated-film-about-honor-killings-exposes-filmmaker-to-witch-hunt/>>
- MZZBN: Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan*. Directed by Babar Javed. Produced by Abdullah Kadwani and Hamayoun Saeed. Pakistan: Geo, 2009-2010. Accessed August 15, 2016.
- Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Milestone, Katie, and Anneke Meyer. *Gender and Popular Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Feminism and Film*. Edited by E. Ann, Kaplan, pp. 34-47. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Negra, Diane. *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Parker, P. *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology*, New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Rouse, Shahnaz J. "Gendered(ed) struggles: the state, religion and civil society" in *Against All Odds: Essays on Women, Religion, and Development from India and Pakistan*. Edited by Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon, and Nighat Said. Khan. New Delhi: Published by Kali for Women, in Collaboration with Isis International

- and the South Asian Women's Forum, 1996.
- Rouse, Shahnaz J. *Shifting Body Politics: Gender, Nation, State in Pakistan*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004.
- Rowley, Christina. "Popular Culture and the Politics of the Visual." In *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*, edited by Laura Shepherd. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015.
- Sangat*. Directed by Kashif Nisar. Performed by Mikhaal Zulfiqar and Saba Qamar. Pakistan: Moomal Entertainment, 2015-2016. Accessed August 15, 2016.
- Savigny, Heather, and Helen Warner. *The Politics of Being a Woman Feminism, Media and 21st Century Popular Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Simonds, Wendy. *Women and Self-help Culture: Reading between the Lines*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
- Steans, Jill. *Gender and International Relations: Theory, Practice, Policy*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Polity, 2013.
- Ticknell, Estella., Deborah Chambers, Joost Van Loon, and Nichola Hudson. Begging for It: "New Femininities," Social Agency, and Moral Discourse in Contemporary Teenage and Men's Magazines. *Feminist Media Studies* Vol. 3 , Iss. 1, 2003.
- Tonkiss, F. 'Analysing Discourse'. In *Researching Society and Culture*. Edited by Seale, C, pp. 245-261. London: SAGE 1998.
- Weiss, Anita M. *Interpreting Islam, Modernity, and Women's Rights in Pakistan*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Weldes, Jutta. *Going Cultural: Star Trek, State Action and Popular Culture*. Millenium, 1999.
- West, Candace and Zimmerman, h. Don. "Doing Gender", *Gender & Society*, June 1987 1: 125-151, doi:10.1177/0891243287001002002.
- Williams, Linda. "Something Else Besides a Mother: Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama." In *Feminism and Film*. Edited by E. Ann, Kaplan, pp. 479-504. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Dedication: For Naghma and Nusrat.