

The Representation of Women in Pakistani Television Dramas: Analyzing the Preservation of Social Norms

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Abstract

The representation of women in Pakistani television dramas is a major influence on how society perceives gender roles. This study explores whether this representation upholds cultural norms or challenges them. Using a mixed-method approach, content and thematic analysis of two selected dramas, Sar-e-Rah (2023) and Durr-e-Shehwar (2012), was conducted to evaluate the portrayal of traditional roles, female agency, empowerment, and subjugation. The result illustrates that Durr-e-Shehwar upholds conventional gender norms by portraying women in submissive, domestic, and dependent roles, reinforcing patriarchal expectations. Female characters in this drama are depicted as self-sacrificing individuals whose primary roles revolve around family obligations. In contrast, Sar-e-Rah presents a more progressive representation, showcasing women as independent decision-makers who challenge societal norms. The drama highlights female agency and empowerment themes, mainly through its protagonist, who defies traditional expectations by taking control of her life and career. The study establishes that Pakistani dramas significantly shape audience attitudes toward women by reinforcing or challenging societal norms. While some dramas offer narratives promoting self-sufficiency and personal autonomy, unfortunately, most provide narratives beholden to traditional structures. This unproportional dual representation creates conflicting messages about women's roles in society. The findings suggest that the media should strive for balanced narratives that reflect cultural realities and encourage gender equality and empowerment rather than propagating limiting stereotypes.

Keywords: Women Representation, Pakistani Dramas, Traditional Roles, Women Empowerment, Subjugation.

Introduction

Television is one of the powerful mediums that constructs and reshapes individuals' opinions and points of view. It not only acts as a mirror of society, reflecting its reality, but also as a tool for mass awareness of political, economic, and social issues. (Sharda, 2014). Broadcasting media and television are considered to bring massive revolutionary progress. In the age of cyber and digital media, television can leave a lasting impact on the audience's minds. Our thinking is solely developed based on what we see and observe. This thinking is then implemented into our lives (Aleem, 2023).

Drama is a fiction or nonfiction narrative that weaves together various aspects of life in the form of content to enlighten and transform society for the better. Dramas depict a problem and communicate possible solutions for tackling these problems (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Pakistani dramas have served as a significant source of portrayal of societal norms and cultural values. These dramas are a staple source of entertainment for women of Pakistan and psychologically impact their audience. Most of these dramas are centered on female characters, such as the role

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of women as wives, mothers, and daughters, which have a broad reach domestically and in the diaspora. The portrayal of women in Pakistani dramas often oscillates between traditional cultural norms and emerging modern ideals. While some dramas celebrate women's independence and individuality, others reinforce patriarchal values, leaving the audience with a conflicting representation. This polarity poses questions about whether the media reinforces or challenges societal stereotypes.

To understand the role of women in Pakistani culture, Pakistani society must be understood. Pakistani society is diverse, with ethnic groups like Sindhi, Punjabi, Balochi, and Pashtun being major and a few smaller ethnic and linguistic groups acculturated (Aleem, 2023). Pakistani society is considered to be a patriarchal society where males still dominate the opposite gender. The conventional image of women is that they obey traditional norms and rely on men for every decision. This is why they are regarded as lower in status and subordinate to men. (Ashfaq & Shafiq, 2018). Pakistani traditional society has firm views on gender roles, resulting in psychological and physical abuses against women. Discriminatory ideas are deep-rooted in practices, customs, and beliefs. It turns out that out of the people who weren't sure of their stance about gender, men were more likely to hold discriminatory views than women and that those with more education exhibited less bias than those with little or no education at all (Khalid, 2021). Women's rights are an essential objective that this society needs to consider. The choice of choosing a partner for herself, her career, and her life decisions should be given to every woman. Only she can decide for herself. Women have to deal with stereotypical behaviors daily. The perception of an independent woman in the mind of society is that she ought to be stubborn and can't settle in a marriage. Pakistani dramas show two types of women: an obedient daughter-in-law and another a rebel. (Sajid & Aleem, 2022).

Women are portrayed in both positive and negative characters, but mainly in negative roles. They are shown as humans who do not know how to respect others and are rude and blunt. This characterization leaves a wrong impression on the minds of the audience. The positive character of women is usually depicted as poor and victims who do not complain and keep bearing the pain inflicted on them. The association of goodness with accepting as much pain as possible misguides the viewers, leading them to build a false narrative. On the other hand, the opposing roles of women are always the privileged class. As an example, let us consider that a person who perpetuates violence against women is not punished for his crime; this would minimize the fear of consequences in the mind of a viewer. Similarly, if a woman is treated poorly by her loved ones, distrust weakens relations with family, friends, and relatives (Butt et al., 2021). Women who exhibit freedom, boldness, and outspokenness are often tied only with upper-class women. Upper-class women are stereotyped as bad mothers, but those from the lower middle class are viewed as perfect as they embody traits that are idealized by society (Khan et al., 2025).

Working women are not encouraged by society and also in Pakistani dramas. The perception is that females who work are negligent of their homely duties and prioritize their jobs. This is not true at all, as women are the ones who support their families financially and take care of their needs. Dramas show this in a negative aspect. Consequently, people set their values and beliefs around this perspective and stop their sisters, wives, and daughters from working.

Pakistani drama writers portray women as someone who has to endure pain in order to keep their marriage intact. They have to compromise and suffer in silence or they have to face divorce. Such dramas depict harsh realities of the society and issues faced by women at the hand of men such as verbal abuse, domestic violence and harassment. (Tabassum & Amin, 2020). Such portrayals normalize the concept of women sacrificing their well-being for the sake of societal expectations, perpetuating conventional gender roles. Not only that, but such portrayals can have a manifestation in the safety of women in real life. A study on the subject identified four themes of physical and verbal violence against women in Pakistani Urdu TV

dramas: anger, violence and its normalization; control and threatening; woman responsible for man happiness; and depiction of both physical and verbal violence. The study also revealed that violence against women is frequently depicted as a normal, justified, and consequence of their actions or decisions. As a result, these dramas reinforce patriarchal norms and mindsets which subordinate women to men and make them reliant on their permission and support (Javed, 2023). Dramas perpetuate the problem and provide very few solutions for it. Majority of the dramas revolve around patriarchal beliefs, reinforcing oppression rather than challenging it. To tackle it requires representation that highlights the issues and encourages women to be resilient and be vocal about their needs and rights.

Problem Statement

The aim of this research study was to investigate how the representation of women in Pakistani television dramas is perceived by its audience. It focuses on the representation in the context of traditional cultural values and modern ideals have an impact on the audience in forming a narrative of how a woman is supposed to be and attitude towards women. This article explores the representation of women and the implications of these portrayals through analysis of female characters in selected dramas.

Objectives

- To analyze the portrayal of women in Pakistani dramas.
- To understand if the depiction upholds cultural norms or challenges them.
- To evaluate audience reception and impact on social perceptions of women.

Research Questions

- How are women represented in Pakistani dramas?
- To what extent modern ideals challenge the traditional role of women?
- How do these portrayals influence perception of women and their role?

Synopsis of Dramas

Sar-e-Rah (2023)

Sar-e-Rah is a Pakistani drama written by Adeel Razzaq & Abdullah Seja and directed by Ahmed Bhatti. The drama follows the story of Rania, who drives taxi after her father falls ill in order to support her family. As she moves through the roads, she encounters passengers with their own stories and struggles. Through Rania's journey the drama highlights important issues such as women empowerment and workplace harassment.

Durr-e-Shehwar (2012)

Durr-e-Shehwar is a Pakistani drama written by Umera Ahmed and directed by Haissam Hussain. The drama follows the story of Durr-e-Shehwar, a young woman who faces challenges in her marriage. The story is narrated through flashbacks when Shadana, daughter of Durr-e-Shehwar faces challenges in her marriage. The drama focuses on marital struggles and the role of women in traditional settings.

Literature Review

Television content has a deep impact on its audience. It builds narratives and these narratives are implemented by the audience in their daily lives, blurring the line between real life and delusional life shown by the media. Consequently, this depiction of fantasized life by TV leads to destruction (Abbas & Mahmood, 2021). Pakistani dramas are very realistic in terms of depicting Pakistani culture. These are very reflective of the beliefs and lifestyles of people of

Pakistan such belonging to different sects, castes and social class. A true picture is painted showcasing how these people are impacted by different issues (Tabassum & Amin, 2020). Kaul and Sahni (2010) conducted research on portrayal of women in Indian TV soaps. They found out that Indian TV serials reinforce stereotypical images of women by depicting them as housewives or glamorous figures with limited roles. Additionally, Indian dramas with high ratings focus on traditional themes rather than empowering narratives (Qaiser & Jabeen, 2008). Explore whether PTV dramas portray women issues in stereotypical image or not. They concluded that women face a lot of issues because of the mentality of society but the dramas on PTV look at these issues from a positive perspective. According to (Zaheer, 2020), Pakistani Television dramas portray women in the light of patriarchal values who solely depend on their husbands financially and emotionally. Working women are underrepresented in dramas as they are criticized under feminist approach (Ashfaq & Shafiq, 2018) examined the definition of “Perfect” women portrayed in Pakistani dramas. Pakistani dramas are reinforcing patriarchal narratives such as wearing dupatta, being homebound, obedient to family and looking after the household are the signs of a good woman. On the other hand, being independent, wearing a western attire and being bold are signs of bad women. Study reveals that men are portrayed in better characters as compared to women in dramas. Men are usually more powerful, assertive and precise about problem solving (Rocío & Monique, 2005). On the other hand, females are portrayed as emotional, passionate and dependent on male for decision making and finances and particularly focus on their beauty. Another study explored eight soap dramas of Hum TV for depiction of career- orientation and power of decision-making (Iqbal & Abdar, 2016). The findings were that about 70% of female character’s education qualification and career choice was not mentioned. They also found out that these female characters lacked the power of decision making and were living repressed lives. Study found liberalism in Pakistan dramas under the cultivation theory by George Gerbner (Manzoor et al., 2018). They observed that although the content of television is fictional, people believe in it and have an impact on them. The result was that the scenes liberating women were considered in a negative aspect. Women were labeled as “besharam” and drifted from cultural norms. According to study (Zakariya, 2012), there has been a shift in portrayals of women characters in Pakistani dramas. During the 1980s-1990s, women represented were bubbly, independent and challenging the conventional values. These characters were authentic as there was humor and women were being women. While the contemporary female characters are living a painful experience of being women in a patriarchal world with no intention to challenge the norms or shaping them (Asif, 2013). Highlights that depiction of women empowerment is opposed. Media should bring their focus on improving the standing position of women in society for socio-economic change. It is recommended that the media actively adopt such an approach that will help in addressing women’s rights, which is a grave need.

Theoretical Framework

This study investigates the representation of women in Pakistani dramas viewed through the framework of social learning theory and cultivation theory of media. These theories will help us further understand how media influences our behaviors and narratives.

Albert Bandura’s Social Learning emphasizes that people learn new behaviors by observing others. It suggests that humans not only learn by direct experience but also through observing behaviors and consequences of these behaviors. Social learning theory highlights the role of cognition and environmental factors in modeling behaviors.

Women representation in Pakistani dramas analyzed within the context of social learning theory whether as housewives or independent individuals influences the attitude of its audience. The role given to women in dramas often sets a precedent for what is accepted or discarded by society. Audiences may personalize with these characters and embrace them in real life,

especially when the role is relatable and rewarded. For instance, if a female who complies with traditional gender roles is frequently portrayed as virtuous, viewers may internalize such portrayals as standardizing and desirable. In contrast, if a female challenges stereotypical norm and is depicted as socially progressing and respected, such depictions will encourage positive behaviors. Cultivation theory is a sociocultural theory that examines the long-term effects of exposure to television on viewer's perception of reality. The more a person views television the more influence television messages have on him. It argues that consistent and repetitive depiction of certain narratives shapes viewers perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and values. As a result, people view the real world through a television lens. Gerbner et al. (1986), in the context of Pakistani television dramas, cultivation theory evaluates the repeated portrayal of women role impact the development of societal norms. For instance, if tv dramas predominantly represent women dependent on men and domestic spaces, it will reinforce patriarchal values among individuals. Conversely, if a woman is characterized as independent and ambitious, such representation will inspire gender equality and progressive attitude in society towards women. Social learning theory and cultivation theory provides a comprehensive framework for this research. While social learning theory emphasizes the immediate effects of gender portrayal in media on cognition, cultivation theory highlights long-term impacts of these representations on societal behaviors. These theories help us evaluate the dual role of Pakistani television dramas as agents of cultural transmission; are they perpetuating cultural norms? Or functioning as a platform to challenge and transform the perception of women?

Hypothesis

- It is more likely that the drama Durr-e-Shehwar portrays traditional gender roles more than Sar-e-Rah.
- It is more likely that Sar-e-Rah presents stronger female agency than Durr-e-Shehwar.
- It is more likely that Sar-e-Rah emphasizes female empowerment more than Durr-e-Shehwar.
- It is more likely that Durr-e-Shehwar depicts female subjugation more often than Sar-e-Rah.

Methodology

The research has been carried out by applying mixed-methods approach, combining content analysis and thematic analysis to study the representation of women in Pakistani Television dramas. Content Analysis was conducted of two different dramas; Sar-e-Rah (2023) and Durr-e-Shehwar (2012).

Data Collection

The data for study was collected from YouTube. The researcher watched the dramas twice thoroughly and collected data by analyzing the episodes.

Population

The population of this study consists of all dramas featuring female protagonists. This study specifically focuses on two dramas. One is Sar-e-rah which was aired on Ary in 2023 and the second drama is Durr-e-Shehwar which was aired on HUM TV in 2012 as the themes focus on women's role.

Sample Size

Sar-e-Rah (2023) consists of 6 episodes and Durr-e-Shehwar (2012) consists of 15 episodes in total. All episodes of both dramas were analyzed to grasp full understanding of character development and theme.

Unit of Analysis

All the dialogues and scenes are selected as a unit of analysis.

Sampling Technique

The study applies a purposive sampling technique. This allows selection of dramas on the basis of their themes, relevant to research's objectives. It makes sure that the sampled content aligns to focus of study which in this case is representation of women in Pakistani TV dramas.

Categories of Construction

- Representation of Traditional Gender Roles
- Female Agency
- Empowerment
- Subjugation

Operationalize

Representation of Traditional Gender Roles: The roles or behaviors associated with a specific gender are referred to as traditional gender roles. The characters that emphasize submissiveness, loyalty to family, kindness and nurturing would fall under the category of traditional roles, upholding cultural norms.

Female Agency: Refers to the capacity of women to act independently and take control of their lives.

Empowerment: The process of becoming confident and claiming one's rights. Instances when women challenge societal expectations and take autonomy.

Subjugation: It is the act of having dominance over something or somebody. Situations where women are being controlled by society or male characters.

Data Analysis and Findings

In this chapter author has presented the results in the form of tables and graphs. Table 1 highlights the frequency of representation of women in traditional gendered roles. *Sar-e-rah* consists of 22 scenes that fall under this category and 54 dialogues representing it. *Durr-e-Shehwar* consists of a total 33 scenes and 60 dialogues falling under women in traditional gendered roles. The higher number of dialogues and scenes in *Durr-e-Shehwar* suggests that the drama devotes more time to reinforcing traditional roles compared to *Sar-e-Rah*, which presents a modernized perspective. So, our hypothesis is accepted.

Table 1: Crosstab of Representation of Traditional Gender Roles

	Episode	Dialogue	Scene
Sar-e-Rah	6	54	22
Durr-e-Shehwar	15	60	33
Total	21	114	43

Table 2 highlights the frequency of female agency. *Sar-e-rah* consists of 20 scenes that fall under this category and 52 dialogues representing it. *Durr-e-Shehwar* consists of 6 scenes and 10 dialogues falling under female agency. The dialogue distribution shows that *Sar-e-Rah* gives more screen time to women asserting their independence, reinforcing female agency. So, our hypothesis is accepted.

Table 2: Crosstab of Female Agency

	Episode	Dialogue	Scene
Sar-e-Rah	6	52	20
Durr-e-Shehwar	15	10	06
Total	21	62	26

Table 3: Crosstab of Women Empowerment

	Episode	Dialogue	Scene
Sar-e-Rah	6	30	20
Durr-e-Shehwar	15	15	07
Total	21	45	27

Table 3 highlights the frequency of women empowerment. Sar-e-rah consists of 20 scenes that fall under this category and 30 dialogues representing it. Durr-e-Shehwar consists of a total 07 scenes and 15 dialogues falling under women empowerment. The higher dialogue-to-scene ratio in *Sar-e-Rah* suggests that women actively discuss empowerment themes, making it a key narrative element. So, our hypothesis is accepted.

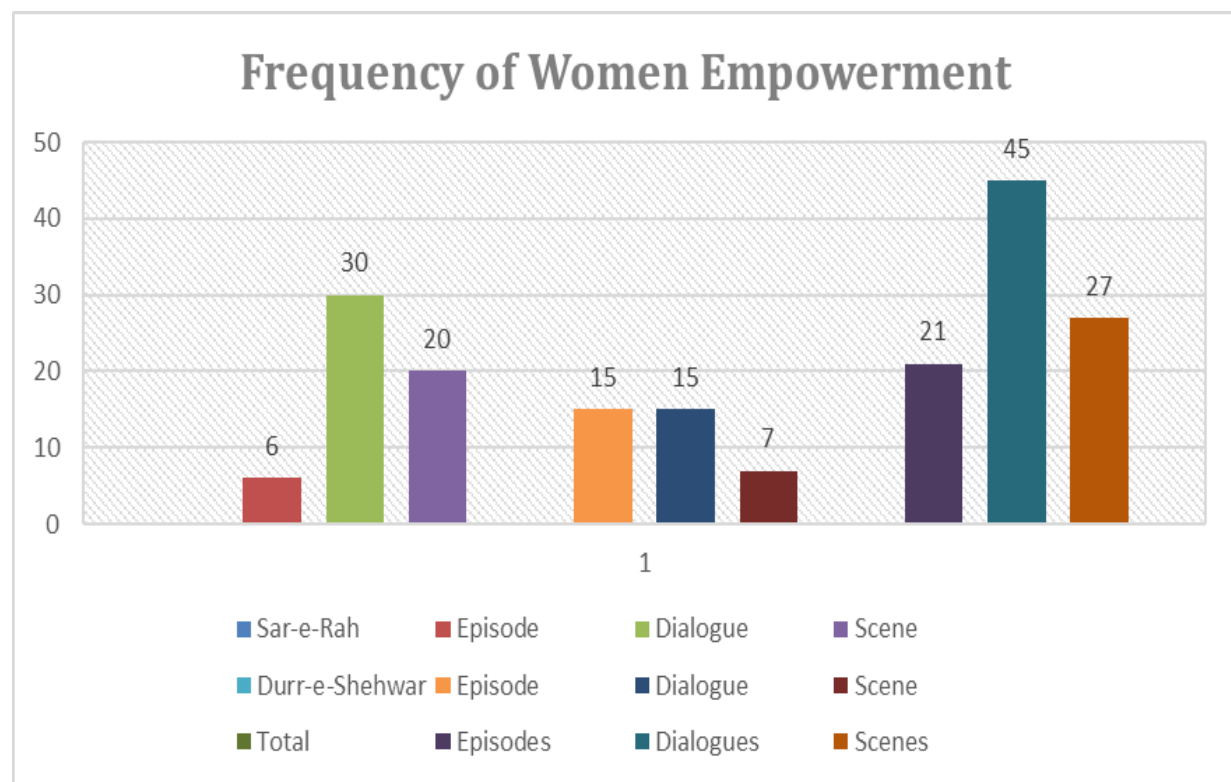
Figure 1: Frequency of Women Empowerment

Figure 2: Frequency of representation of traditional gender roles

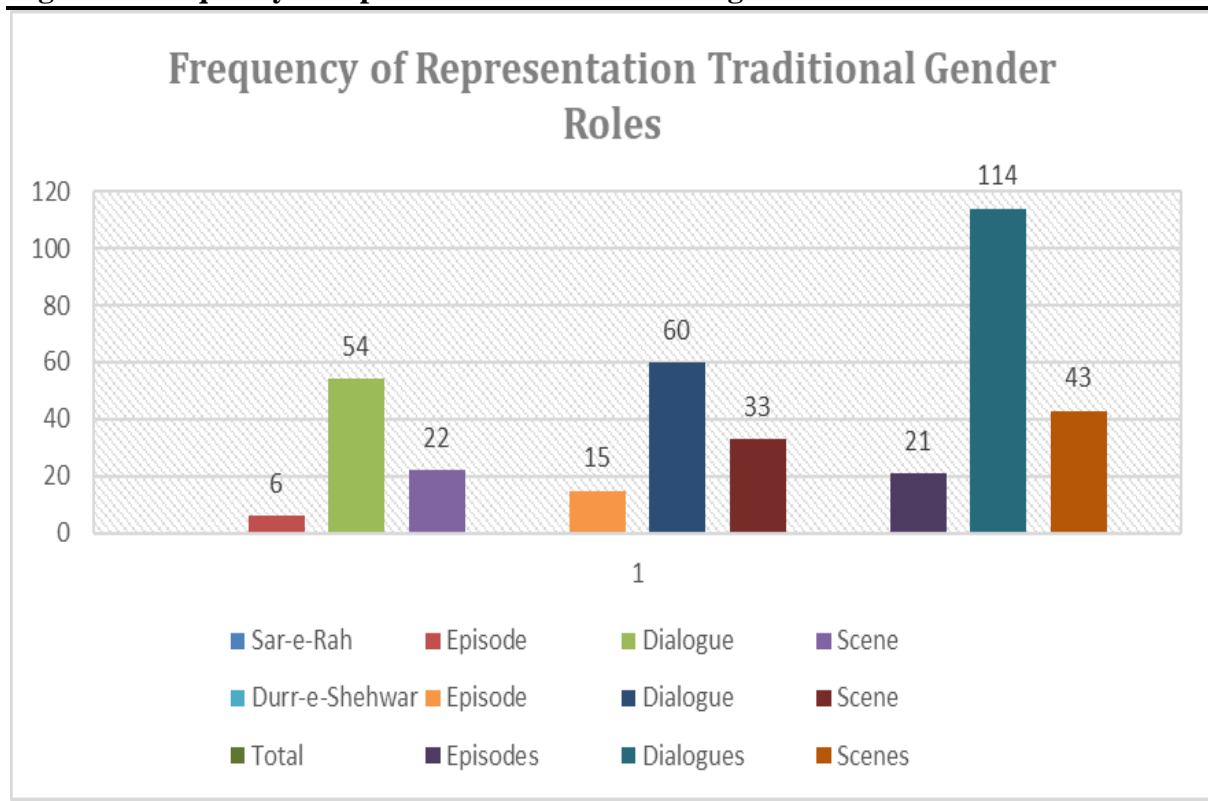


Figure 3: Frequency of subjugation

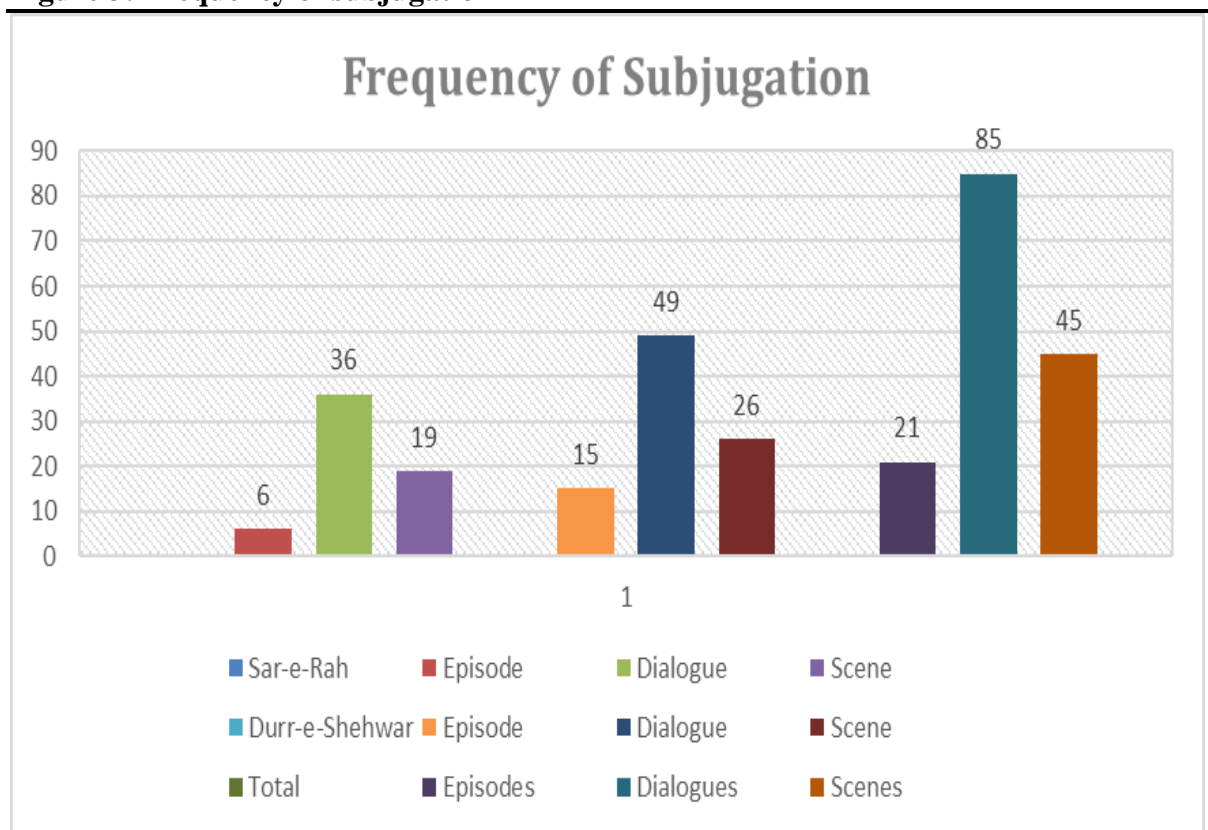
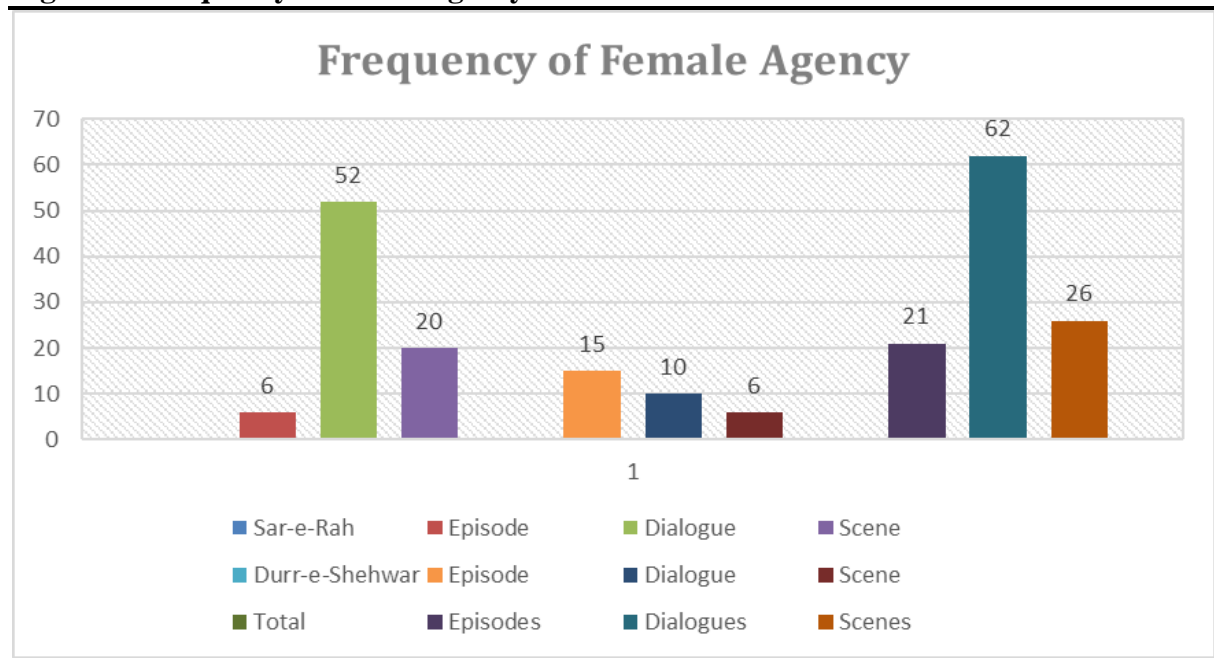


Figure 4: Frequency of female agency**Table 4: Crosstab of Subjugation**

	Episode	Dialogue	Scene
Sar-e-Rah	6	36	19
Durr-e-Shehwar	15	49	26
Total	21	85	45

Figure 4 highlights the frequency of subjugation. *Sar-e-rah* consists of 19 scenes that fall under this category and 36 dialogues representing it. *Durr-e-Shehwar* consists of a total 26 scenes and 49 dialogues falling under subjugation. The higher number of dialogues and scenes in *Durr-e-Shehwar* suggests that subjugation is a recurring theme, whereas *Sar-e-Rah* leans towards empowerment. So, our hypothesis is accepted.

Table 5: Cross tabulation of Hypothesis Status Presentation

Hypothesis	Status
It is more likely that drama <i>Durr-e-Shehwar</i> portrays traditional gender roles more than <i>Sar-e-Rah</i> .	Accepted
It is more likely that <i>Sar-e-Rah</i> presents stronger female agency than <i>Durr-e-Shehwar</i> .	Accepted
It is more likely that <i>Sar-e-Rah</i> emphasizes female empowerment more than <i>Durr-e-Shehwar</i> .	Accepted
It is more likely that <i>Durr-e-Shehwar</i> depicts female subjugation more often than <i>Sar-e-Rah</i> .	Accepted

Discussion

The findings of the study offer important understanding about the representation of women in Pakistani television dramas and how these depictions have an implication on gender roles. By conducting analysis of *Sar-e-Rah* and *Durr-e-Shehwar*, it is observed that both the dramas differ in their portrayal of women in traditional roles, female agency, empowerment and subjugation.

The first research question examined was women representation in Pakistani television dramas. The analysis led to results that traditional gender roles are more evident in *Durr-e-Shehwar*, where women are dependent on men and sacrifice their dreams for familial duties. The drama reinforces the belief that women are primary caretakers of the household. They have to be obedient, patient and compromising to make marriages work. They must suffer and endure in order to keep harmony among their family. Conversely, *Sar-e-Rah* challenges patriarchal beliefs and presents strong female characters who take control of their lives. The drama portrays women as autonomous individuals capable of making their own decisions, thus, providing a modern outlook on gender roles.

The second research question explored to what extent do modern ideals challenge cultural norms. The results indicate that *Sar-e-rah* is more challenging of such norms as compared to *Durr-e-Shehwar*. The former brings in narratives of career-orientation, self-sufficiency who oppose societal expectations and depict women who stand for themselves while the latter confine themselves to fortify traditional norms. This distinction highlights the shifting nature of media, where some dramas act as catalysts for social progress others uphold cultural norms. The third research question investigated influence of these portrayal on perception of women and their roles. The assessment uncovered that more repeated exposure to traditional social norms such as in *Durr-e-Shehwar* normalize patriarchal beliefs, potentiality discouraging women to stand up for themselves. In contrast, *Sar-e-Rah* encourages viewers to give further thought to societal norms and advocate for diverse perspective on women's role. The power of media should not be undermined in influencing societal views, therefore, the representation of portrayal of women in television dramas play significant role in upholding or challenging social norms.

Our findings confirm that *Durr-e-Shehwar* perpetuates stereotypical roles of women as self-sacrificing individuals whether they are mothers, wives or daughters. Their frequent portrayal as obedient and sacrificing is creating an expectation that women need to endure hardships and suffer in silence for the sake of family stability. In light of Gerber's Cultivation Theory, repeated exposure to such content conditions the audience to accept them as reality. If viewers consistently see women suffering without resistance, they may perceive such struggles necessary. In contrast, *Sar-e-rah* propagates liberating roles of women as self-sufficient and resilient individuals. Them being depicted as individuals asserting their autonomy in a restrictive society challenges the deep-rooted norms. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that when women are depicted in such strong portrayals, viewers mainly internalize these attributes and apply them to real life.

Overall, the findings indicate that depiction of women in Pakistani television dramas continues to move between maintaining and questioning cultural norms. While some dramas conform to traditional norms, others establish groundwork for modern narrative to empower women. This study emphasizes the need for balanced portrayal. Future television shows should portray diverse female characters that are progressing and challenging stereotypes, contributing to society for the better. Addressing these matters with responsible storytelling will help fill the gap between modern and traditional gender perception in Pakistan.

Further research should expand on these findings by selecting and analyzing a wider range of dramas and including audiences' reception to study how these representations impact society's behavior towards women. This approach can help the media industry to move towards more inclusive and empowering women representation in dramas.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Pakistani dramas are embedded with traditional roles, no matter how much they try to incorporate modern ideals. Although there are characters defying cultural norms, the fundamental themes perpetuate the belief that women's primary role is within domestic

spheres. This polarity presents a contradictory notion that does both, upholds and challenges cultural norms. It is essential that Pakistani producers and drama writers bring in multidimensional narratives and characters to drive change. As media not only reflect realities but contribute to progress, greater media responsibility is required to break these stereotypes and promote gender equality.

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