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Analyzing Portrayals of Modern Women and Popular Culture in Television Soap Operas of Pakistan

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Media convergence has phenomenally transformed Indian television audience's soap opera viewing experience by offering digital exposure to diversified content. The paper presents an exploratory study, analyzing Indian viewers' reception of the dramatized portrayals of modern women and popular culture in television soap operas of Pakistan. The study finds reasons for Pakistan's soap operas' popularity and registers Indian readers' guided interpretations of polysemic televised projections of women and culture. Triangulation methodology is employed including questionnaire, telephonic interviews, and participatory observations. Discourse analysis of celebrated soap opera '*Humsafar*' detected a research problem that women participate in reinforcing misogynic value systems with rigidly dichotomized and objectified roles, treated with an androcentric gaze. The paper introduces "altagonist" as a hybrid character category that negotiates between the bipolar roles. The study concludes that dramatized representations of Pakistani women are at the crossroads of east-west cultures, struggling with patriarchy, expanding their gender capacities, and initiating behavior change. The research paper holds crucial relevance in the Indian subcontinent to re-open an academic doorway for participatory communication on television soap operas as integral units of South Asian Popular Culture.

Keywords: Audience reception, digital media consumption, gender discourse, Pakistani television drama, South Asia, popular culture, TV soap operas

Television has evolved as a powerful mass medium that dominates the organization of viewers' personal spaces, the topic of conversations, and most importantly, the content of viewers' thought processes. Watching television once used to be a collective, family activity; ideally spaced in living rooms with the remote control war between family members. The convergence of television with digital technologies has transformed the viewing activity into a more personalized and preferably isolated experience, spaced in bedrooms (Livingstone, 2007, p. 303) with maximized content choices and minimized attention spans. In the pre-digital era, television facilitated one-way communication between the senders (producers) and receivers (viewers) with no feedback mechanism. In this way, television allowed viewers to opt for a passive role. However, the digital age has filliped instant, two-way communication between the television content creators and viewers through digital feedback mechanism and therefore activated the role of viewers in the interpreting and critically reviewing polysemic media texts.

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Television Soap Operas and Active Audiences

Soap opera is considered as a devalued “black sheep” among the popular genres of television programming. It is largely perceived as a media product consumed for low-prestige entertainment. The term “soap opera” was coined during the 1930s, when American serialized radio dramas started getting sponsored by soap manufacturing companies. It is the use of human voice, and moving visuals have made television soap operas more popular than radio dramas and pulp fiction. Soap opera is defined as “a genre of television programming that is transmitted daily, having complex, melodramatic, mythic and interwoven plots and open-ended narratives that resist closure and a wide range family oriented characters with women at the foci of each narrative” (Munshi, 2012, p. 20). Television soap operas are known with the name of “serials” in India and “drama” in Pakistan. “Soap operas reflect two impulses: to imitate daily life and to transcend daily life.” (Livingstone, 2007, p. 52)

It is believed that gender is embedded in every genre of television programming, and soap opera is historically considered a soft, feminine genre (Brown, 1991). “Soap operas target predominantly female viewers and occupy their day or night time. Soap operas frequently use the “cliff hanger technique” to build up the suspense and drama and hook up the viewers who eagerly wait for the next episode” (Livingstone, 2007, p. 53). Soap opera has been an active vehicle of social communication on radio, television and pulp fiction based magazines. The escalation of television soap operas on the digital communication channels has made them widely consumed by the global audience, which is socio-culturally heterogeneous and scattered in terms of geography and psychograph. Role of the audience as “active viewers” has become important in soap opera discourses since television audience has been transformed into consumers who seek information, entertainment, and education from consumption of television soap opera. Soap Opera audience is actively involved in making sense of media texts at emotional, cognitive, and behavioral levels. “The active and regular viewer of soap opera engages in para-social interactions with its characters, as if communicating with real people, thus blurring the boundaries between ‘viewing’ and ‘living’” (Livingstone, 2007, p. 3). Soap opera messages are open-ended and plural and have varied interpretations guided by viewers’ existing knowledge pool and belief systems. In a similar context, “Active Audience Theory” was found by (Hall, 1973) which states that the media audience is actively engaged (often unconsciously) in the consumption and interpretation of media texts rather than remaining passive and resourceless recipients. A media message sent across by the encoder produces different or varied understandings by individuals given to their family background, beliefs, values, culture, interests, education, and experiences. In this way, the audience is empowered with their role as active participants and readers involved in the interpretation of the polysemic media texts.

Studies on media effects assumed that there are “empty spaces” in the social and private life of a viewer that one seeks to fill with the consumption of television soap operas. The para-social interactions with the soap opera viewers are functioned to compensate the real world social interactions. “Television soap operas are utilized by viewers to gratify the needs of having personal relationships, reality orientation, information seeking, and personal identity” (Blumler, 1979). Watching soap operas allows viewers to gratify the need for escapism from real life and indulge in the fictitious spaces that allow emotional experiences that seem real, facilitating para-social interactions between the characters and viewers.

Indian Audience's Encounter with Pakistani Soap Operas

There has been a paramount shift in the Indian audience's experience of consuming televised soap operas in the age of digital communication. Soap operas possess a soft power with which they have transcended geographical boundaries via the Internet, thus opening new, participatory avenues for cross-cultural communication. The classic examples are Afghani audience's celebration of Indian soap opera '*Kyunkii Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*' dubbed in Dari; soaring popularity of Pakistan's Urdu drama '*Humsafar*' in India and dubbed in Arabic for the Middle East audience. Indian viewers' digital consumption of Pakistan's Urdu and Punjabi soap operas on Netflix and YouTube are indicative of the fact that a section of India's contemporary audience is actively selective, geographically heterogeneous and open to diverse cultural content produced in Pakistan.

Indian Audience's first encounter with Pakistani soap operas happened in 2014 with the launch of ZEE Zindagi channel that started legalized broadcast of Pakistani soap operas. The tagline of the channel was "*Jodey-Dilon-Ko*" (literally: Bringing us Closer). According to the triangulated study by (Bhattacharya & Nag, 2016, p. 65), "Indian audience appraised Pakistani soap operas for being shorter in duration, having realistic stories with believable characters speaking ornate Urdu and minimal makeup as compared to the Indian soap operas that involve never-ending, fictitious *saas-bahu* sagas with unbelievable twists and turns and women loaded with heavy makeup and gaudy jewels."

A study conducted by (Shantharaju & Ashok, 2016, p. 13) concluded that Pakistani TV dramas were hit in India due to the absence of evil vamps hatching poisonous plans against others and unrealistic scenarios like dead men coming to life as these are fictitious things were popularly shown in Indian soap operas. Indian audience needed a break from unrealistic Indian soap operas and therefore, switched their viewing loyalty towards Pakistani soap operas. The North Indian older generation reminisced the era of 1990's when video cassettes of Pakistan's most popular television dramas like '*Khuda Ki Basti*' (1969) '*Ankahi*' (1982), '*Tanhaiyaan*' (1986) and '*Dhoop Kinaray*' (1987) were imported to India and were consumed by a niche, urban audience. In this way, popular Pakistani soap operas like '*Zindagi Gulzar Hai*' (2012) '*Humsafar*' (2011) and '*Jackson Heights*' (2014) became "soft image ambassadors of Pakistan, involving Indian viewers in cultural conversations about the portrayals of Pakistani women and cultural representations" (Yaqin, 2016, p. 60). Actor Fawad Khan's fandom reached to the extent of celebrating one month long Fawad Khan Festival in India. (ANI, 2016) Although Pakistani soap operas were banned on Indian television post-Uri attack, Indian audience continues to consume them on digital platforms like YouTube, Daily Motion, and Netflix.

Portrayals of Women in Pakistani Soap Operas

Traditionally, Pakistani society has a predominance of a strong patriarchal value system that subjugates the position of women in public and private spheres. The orthodox cultural practices like *vani*, *vatta-satta*, *Pak-bibi*, etc. are imposed on women by men in their family. Less emphasis on girl child education is rooted in the stereotype that women are supposed to remain domesticated post marriage. The insecurity of married women stems from the fear of bigamy and divorce. Economic empowerment is not considered as the vital solution for women liberation, given to the conservative thought process that a "good woman should remain domesticated." Pakistani television soap opera has been used as a tool to reflect and challenge gender issues and social injustices, giving a voice to the voiceless. Female

soap opera directors like Sultana Siddiqui and prolific Urdu drama writers like Haseena Moin projected women as cultured and modern: strong, independent, career-oriented and potent of challenging the rigid orthodoxies in Pakistani society.

Classic heroines of 1980s penned by Haseena Moin like Sana Murad of *Ankahi* (1982), Zoya of *Dhoop Kinaray* (1987) and Zara of *Tanhaiyan* (1986) were modern, liberal and assertive with good moral values and positive energy to challenge the misogyny and patriarchy imposed by the society. "These characters belonged to the middle-class families who were strong, confident, competent and well-spoken individuals living in metropolitan cities" (Yaqin, 2016, p. 59). During the 1990s, an iconic soap opera '*Marvi*' (1993) based on a Sindhi folktale '*Umar Marvi*' written by Noor-ul-Huda Shah portrayed young women in the light of empowerment who struggled with the feudal system prevalent in rural Punjab. The poignant portrayals of Marvi and Laila became feminine symbols of 90's Sindhi modernism, courage, and women liberation.

A study conducted by (Zakariya, 2012) concluded that the contemporary age had witnessed a paradigm shift in portrayals of women in Pakistani soap operas. While female portrayals during 1980s-1990s were liberal, bubbly rebels, challenging orthodox social norms, the recent portrayals of women are stereotyped and rigidly dichotomized and reinforcing the regressive social orthodoxies. In a panel discussion on 'Feminine Portrayals in Pakistani Dramas' at Faiz Ghar, Lahore, (Shahzad, 2017) concluded "there is a volley of words that are associated with the contemporary female characters on Pakistani television: devalued, inferior and dependent. The portrayals of women within these frameworks communicate a lot of regressive ideologies and practices to the mass audience."

According to an analytical study conducted by (Roy, 2016) on 'portrayals of women in popular Pakistani soap operas,' "the literary from which the contemporary Pakistani TV dramas emerge tend to naturalize the oppression of women as meek and weak, submissive, seductress and a sexual object of male's desire." (Roy, 2016, p. 1041). Likewise, a study by (Chaudhary, 2013) revealed "The female protagonists in the 'Golden Age of Pakistani TV dramas' (1980-1990) used to be an upper-class woman whereas today, the ideal protagonist is the lower class woman and her class imposes restrictions on her free movement in public and private spaces. For instance, *Dhoop Kinaray* had a progressive, working, liberal protagonist Zoya who was ahead of her time and she did not ask for audience validation for her carefree nature by being "goody two shoes," piteous and untouched woman."

The classic soap operas penned by Haseena Moin had no 'negative characters,' and women sought mutual empowerment, whereas women in the contemporary Pakistani soap operas share bitter relationships. The new age female antagonists convey the idea rooted in a colonial complex that western lifestyle is modern and can be used to belittle eastern cultured, conservative protagonist women. In the essay titled "*Drama Serials: A Golden Age*" (Zakariya, 2012, p. 3) wrote, "during the 1980s, single parenting was not pitied in Pakistani dramas. She gives the reference of *Aani* (played by Badar Khalil) of '*Tanhaiyaan*' who kept two young girls with her with pride without being considered as the "oh poor woman" as in the case of Khirad's mother and Khirad herself in *Humsafar*."

(Iqbal & Abdar, 2016) Concluded in their study on titled Pakistani women's career orientation and empowerment in soap operas "70% of female characters were domesticated, lacking decision making power and their educational qualification was not mentioned in the soap opera." A similar study conducted on "the contested images of 'perfect women' in Pakistani Television dramas" revealed the existence of a rigid dichotomy and polarization in feminine portrayals as "good woman" and "bad woman" in Pakistani soap operas. "The female protagonist is depicted as "goody-two-shoes, very slim, exceptionally beautiful,

wearing a *dupatta*, less educated, belonging to a middle class, humble, tolerant, self-sacrificing, homebound, submissive and seeks employment only for curbing the financial crisis. The antagonist is portrayed as ambitious, career-oriented, loud, selfish, adorns western lifestyle and loud makeup and hairstyles, drives a car and gets punished for being liberal in her values and behavior" (Ashfaq & Shafiq, 2018, p. 45).

The study conducted by (Zakariya, 2012) found that the rigid dichotomies present in women characters in *Humsafar* are traditional/modern, eastern/western, conservative/liberal, and good/evil. She critiqued that class difference is used to dichotomize the characters and communicate that the bad woman (antagonist) is a liberal, working woman and is western in her dressing, language, and lifestyle whereas the good woman (protagonist) is a traditional homemaker and is eastern and is projected as "the ideal woman." A veteran actor and director (Sammo, 2015) commented on the bipolar roles for women: "there is a protagonist woman, who is the tragic queen, and she suffers throughout the drama, and there is an antagonist woman who thrives on the suffering of protagonist's misery. The projection of women in novelized dramas of Pakistan is bipolar and can be considered in two extremes of either being angelic or demon, which makes these characters shallow and the audience is made to swallow it".

The popular examples of rigidly dichotomized portrayals of women in contemporary Pakistani TV dramas are the protagonists: Khirad of '*Humsafar*' (2011) and Mannu of '*Mann Mayal*' (2016) who are represented as the epitome of endurance, victimized by misfortunes and dependency on male characters. They convey the feeling of pity and hopelessness to the viewers. On the other hand, the antagonists like Sarah of '*Humsafar*' (2011) and Jeena of '*Mann Mayal*' (2016) are portrayed as fashionable, independent, career-driven and westernized women who are emotionally dependent on one man, only to kill themselves in the end for the sake of their one-sided love.

All these regressive cultural codes embedded in Pakistani TV dramas cumulatively lead to the representation of a "hetero-normative visual culture" (Yaqin, 2016, p. 59). Hetero-normative visual culture can be operationally defined in the context of Pakistani television soap operas as: "*a popular media construct that normalizes a rigid dichotomy in social roles and gendered responsibilities in the eastern society through mass culture vehicles like television soap operas. Heteronormative visuals are created for satiating the patriarchal norms and misogynist ideologies using the androcentric gaze; thereby identifying women in terms of their relationship to men.*"

Heteronormative visuals are created for satiating the patriarchal norms and misogynist ideologies using the androcentric gaze; thereby identifying women in terms of their relationship to men. In the essay "*Framing Women: Tradition and Modernity in Popular Pakistani Television Drama*" (Yaqin, 2016, p. 60) suggests "the contemporary television dramas of Pakistan reiterate heteronormative culture through three characteristics. First, the female protagonist is trained by her mother, whose husband has passed away or lives with his second wife. Second, there is a focus on cousin marriages. Third, there is a conflict between tradition and modernity as well as the moral divide between the elite and the urban, middle class."

Methodology

The paper employed triangulation methodology using quantitative data collection tool (semi-structured questionnaire) as well as qualitative data collection tools (in-depth interviews and discourse analysis). Purposive and Snowball Sampling techniques have been used to identify potential respondents for the study. A semi-structured questionnaire

was administered to a sample of 33 respondents, including 24 females and 9 males. The respondents were primarily located in Delhi/NCR and were aged between 18 to 81 years. The questionnaire resulted in six significant findings. First, it found out the most watched Pakistani soap operas by Indian viewers. Second, it discovered Indian viewers' reasons for watching Pakistan's soap operas. Third, the questionnaire resulted in categorization of viewers as heavy viewers, moderate viewers and light viewers. This categorization helped in finding the potential respondents for further qualitative engagement. Fourth, it gauged Indian audience's loyalty shift towards Pakistan's soap operas. Fifth, it explored the micro effect of watching Pakistani soap operas on Indian female viewers' fashion apparel buying choices.

This process has aided in the selection of 8 viewers (4 males and four females) for telephonic interviews that involved questions on the popular portrayals of modern women intertwined with popular culture representations. Discourse Analysis of Indian audience's most watched television soap opera '*Humsafar*' is incorporated in the paper for concretizing the qualitative findings, resulting in the formulation of a multi-layered research problem and discovery of the new emerging character category in Pakistan's television soap opera. Indian Audience's Analysis of Popular Portrayals of Women in Pakistani TV Soap Operas The two celebrated protagonist characters Kashaf of '*Zindagi Gulzar Hai*' (2012) and Khirad of '*Humsafar*' (2011) garnered critical responses. Kashaf is received as a bold, ambitious, confident, decisive, assertive, and independent character. Her mother Rafia was left by her husband as she could not give him a son. It was Kashaf who exceptionally challenged the gender bias imposed by her father through scholarship oriented higher education followed by government employment, leading to self-empowerment. The soap opera offered education and employment of women as powerful solutions to take the society out of the orthodox doldrums. On the flip side, Khirad of '*Humsafar*' has been criticized for conveying regressive mindset. Despite being educated, Khirad never sought full-time employment, and she chose to stay as much dependent she could count on her husband, financially and emotionally. She reconciled with the same husband who threw her out of his life due to mistrust, which was suggested of a very problematic ending. Khirad shared a very bitter relationship with other women in the drama and women portrayals in *Humsafar* pull each other down instead of seeking mutual empowerment.

A significant intervention in the discourse of Pakistani women protagonists was made by Sara of '*Doraha*' (2013) and Zenia of Malal (2010). Sara broke the conventional norm of the heroine being thin and westernized. Sara was a plump, confident, and intelligent, well educated eastern woman. She was a voracious reader and was simply dressed. She stood against all the odds to marry the man of her choice, did household chores and sought employment post marriage, despite opposition from her in-laws. Two young female respondents aspired to be like Sara. The only negative aspect highlighted by elderly respondents was triple *talaq*, which weakened Sara's character. She was thrown out by her husband after divorce due to which she suffered from depression.

On the other hand, Zenia was a middle-aged, brown woman living in New York who was in love with her best friend, Danish. Malal is Zenia's organic odyssey wherein she discovered that she was a play toy in the hands of Danish who kept dumping and wanting her due to which she underwent deep turmoil. Zenia sacrificed good job opportunities for Danish; cooked meals for him and took very tasteful care of his apartment until he went to Pakistan and married a young girl of his mother's choice. Danish's mother's dialogue in Episode 2 reflected rejection for Zenia: "*Ek to Zenia ki Umar Zyada Hai, American values hain usme, mamuli shakal surat ki hai, uska family background hume nahi pta. Biwi ko hamesha 6-7 saal miyan se chhota hona chahiye. Jitni jawan hogi utni asaani se tum usay mold kar*

sakoge, usay control kiya ja sakega" (Zenia is old aged with American values and is ordinary looking, and we know nothing about her family background. The wife should be at least 6-7 years younger than the man so that she can be molded and controlled by him.) Danish looked for a dalliance with Zenia post marriage. Zenia struggled hard to gain strength and courage to get over her feelings for him, which makes her very relatable to young female viewers. Zenia was an emotional fool who overlooked Danish's selfish, fickle mindedness and insensitivity. He kept giving her mixed signals and never wanted her to mingle with other men and to remain his property without any commitment.

The most discussed antagonist Zoya of *'Dil-e-Muztar'* (2013) was represented as a street smart, a bubbly young woman who wore very loud, colorful clothes with braided hair, glass bangles and bright red lipstick. She was a Bollywood fan and listened to Munni Begum's songs. Zoya had a villager's accent, and female viewers never noted a dull moment with her presence on screen. Her dialogues were very engaging and full of intended pun. She hated the conventional household chores like cooking or babysitting; rather, she wanted a hassle-free life with her neighbor's husband, whom she almost stole with her sharpness. She used to overpower her husband. She exemplified the possibility that the antagonist need not be depressing making the atmosphere dingy, rather can be effervescent, sharp-tongued and funny. Women respondents agreed with the researcher's participatory observation that Zoya's character added a new dimension to the portrayal of an antagonist who used to make them laugh and stay interested rather than sending spite across the television screen.

The dichotomized projections are negotiated by a new character category termed as *'altagonist'* for someone who alters between the characteristics of the positive protagonist and negative antagonists during the story. Altagonist is defined in the context of women in Pakistani TV soap operas as *"the strategic amalgamation of positive and negative traits in the character, breaking the conventional bipolarity in portrayals. An altagonist begins as passively positive with eventual alteration of negative representations and guides the story forward."* Such characters are multi-shaded and give a larger creative space and performing margin to the artists in comparison to the black and white characters. The most discussed example of altagonist is Sophia of *'Aahista Aahista'* (2014) who was projected as an educated, employed, fashionable and independent Anglo-Indian woman living in America with her Pakistani husband, Zavar. Sophia's portrayal begins as a happy and positive wife who does yoga and meditation, cooks lovingly for her husband, drives to the office, and decorates her house with amazing aesthetic sense. Gradually, Sophia starts reflecting her negative traits and becomes anti-heroine when her fear, doubt, and possession turn into insecurity, jealousy, and aggression. Zavar brings his second wife Hayaa to live with Sophia without disclosing her identity and doing so; he wronged both the women involved. She is dissecting Sophia's character aided in understanding the reason for her neurosis. She had a disturbed childhood and had never experienced happiness in her family, which is why she turned possessive for Zavar. Pregnant Sophia catches Zavar and Hayaa closer together and violently throws her out of their house. An epiphany hits Sophia that her marriage is torn apart. Running after her husband, Sophia, falls and loses her unborn baby. Altagonist Sophia is ultimately divorced, discarded and isolated by Zavar, and she is shown lamenting in a dingy room in the end.

Discourse Analysis of Pakistan's Popular Soap Opera: '*Humsafar*'

'*Humsafar*' is a popular cult classic television soap opera of Pakistan, directed by Sarmad Khoosat and produced by Momina Duraid Productions. Generically, a melodramatic romance of 23 episodes, *Humsafar* is a dramatic adaptation of an Urdu novel named '*Humsafar*' penned by Farhat Ishtiaq who is considered as "the queen of romance" in Pakistani Urdu literature. (Siddiqui, 2013) *Humsafar*' is Khirad's melodramatic odyssey that begins with losing her mother and marrying her first cousin Ashar followed by discovering love, sacrifice, mistrust, pain, longing, loss, and reunion. The first broadcast on Pakistan's HUM TV, *Humsafar* was broadcast on two Indian television channels Rishtey and ZEE Zindagi. (Beelal, 2013) Witnessing record-breaking popularity in India, *Humsafar* was re-run five times on ZEE Zindagi. (Javed, 2014). The protagonists of *Humsafar*, Khirad and Ashar, became household names in India. Khirad's *pishwases* (fusion of frock with Asian traditional trousers) became a style motif in Indian fashion. (Ajaz, 2017)

Character Analysis of Khirad: The Protagonist

Khirad is portrayed as a sober, conservatively eastern, educated, egoistic young woman with middle-class values, who lived with her mother and *khaala* Batool. Khirad adorned *shalwar kameez* with *dupatta*; tied a braid with nude makeup and had poised body language. Her father expired, and her mother was a government school teacher. Khirad completed B.Sc. in Mathematics and took home tuitions to make ends meet. When she found about her mother's fatal ailment, she refused to take favor from her maternal uncle, Baseerat. In episode 1, she told her mother: "*Zindagi bhar mamu ne humko pucha tak nahi aur aap unka ahsaan lene chali hain. Aapka ilaaj main karaungi. Main parhai chhor dunggi. Job kar lungi.*" (Maternal Uncle never cared for you all these years and now you want to ask him for an obligatory favor? I will get your treatment done. I will leave my studies and start working.) On the contrary, Khirad was shifted to her rich maternal uncle Baseerat's house where she got forcefully married to her first cousin, Ashar. Khirad became a victim of her circumstances. Khirad suffered from an inferiority complex in her marital home. In episode 5, she tells her friend Afsheen: "*main jiss shaqs ke kabil nai, layak nahi, jo har aitbar se mujhse behtar ho, uski zindagi mein mujhe zabardasti shamil kar diya gaya hai.*" (I am not good enough for that person and he is better than me in all respects. I am forcefully included in his life.) Eventually, Khirad transformed herself into a domesticated, submissive, dutiful wife and caring daughter-in-law. Khirad chose to wear *pishwases* (fusion of Anarkali frock with Asian *Churidars*/Bottoms) in solid colors with *dupatta*. She kept her hair open as Ashar liked it that way. With Ashar's motivation, she starts pursuing masters in Applied Mathematics. Khirad danced in the rain like a naïve child and called her husband "*buddhi rooh*" (aged soul) who saw her dancing from aside which conventionally objectified feminine agency in romance. When Baseerat died, her mother-in-law Fareeda removed Khirad from Asher's life by proving her infidelity. Khirad begged bitterly to Ashar to trust her chastity, but pregnant Khirad is thrown out of her house by Fareeda at night, and that is when Khirad once again became the victim of her circumstances. She had no source of income, which marks her dependency. Khirad approached her estranged husband after six years of separation for financial aid. Despite completing her education, she never sought employment, rather relied on her husband for money. Therefore, Khirad's identity struggle

could not culminate into self-empowerment. Ashar was ready to forgive Khirad, but she boldly responded in episode 21: *“maine aapse maufi mangi kab hai?”* (When did I seek apology from you?) This dialogue came as a shocker to Ashar and saved her dignity. However, she reunited with Ashar at the end, which is a very unjustified ending, given to his mistrust for six long years and hard life lessons.

Character Analysis of Sarah: The Antagonist

Sarah is portrayed as an ambitious, westernized, career oriented, well educated young woman with a lively social life. She liked going for clubbing, swimming, dine outing and parties. She wore business suits with loud makeup in the office and tank tops and loose pajamas otherwise. Sarah is initially depicted as health, conscious woman. The only person she loved the most was her first cousin Ashar and dreamt of getting married to him since childhood. Her character revolved around the orbit of Ashar. She lost her identity in her obsession to get Ashar’s love and attention and underwent deep turmoil after knowing that Ashar never loved her romantically and was getting married to Khirad. Heartbroken Sarah threw things in aggression and stopped eating food. Sarah belittled Khirad, called her *“chaadar mein lipti hui jahil larki”* (a cloth-clad illiterate girl). In episode 2, Sarah attempted suicide. Sarah hoped against hope and tried to win Ashar even after his marriage. In episode 4 but Sarah replied to her mother’s objection: *“Zindagi Ashar ke bagair bhi barbaad aur uske saath bhi. Iss se acha uske saath reh kar barbaad karun.”* (Life is destroyed without him and with him too. So, it is better that I destroy my life being with him.) Sarah turned self-destructive in her obsession for Ashar. However, Ashar never married Sarah even when he was separated from Khirad for six long years. In episode 18, Sarah’s mother asked Sarah to face the reality said: *“Saroo, meri beti itni talented hai, just don’t throw your life away like this. koi mukabla nai hai tumhara aur Khirad ka.”* (Dear Saroo, My daughter is so talented. There is no comparison between you and Khirad.) Sarah needed psychiatric help but never sought it. Sarah went in self-sabotage and result was devastating. In episode 19, Sarah realized that she can never get Ashar, so she committed suicide and died. In this way, Sarah is the weakest character in *Humsafar*. As the camera eye follows Khirad’s journey, the viewer tends to sideline Sarah’s pain; her loss of life and love.

Character Analysis of Fareeda: The ‘Altagonist’

Fareeda is an altagonist in *Humsafar* who played the mother of Ashar. She lived a luxurious life in Karachi and ran an NGO for human rights protection. She began as a positive character who wanted the best for her son, Ashar. She resisted her husband’s decision to get Ashar married overnight to Khirad in episode 2: *“Mera beta duniya ki sabse achhi university mein parha. Maine uss pe mehnat ki hai. Aap ek mamuli se larki se uski shaadi karane ja rahe hain?”* (My son studied in world’s best university. I have worked hard on him. You are going to get him married to a mediocre girl?) Fareeda was threatened to be divorced by her husband if she disagreed, so she had to submit. She never liked Khirad as her daughter-in-law but was initially sympathetic towards her. It is only after her husband’s death that revealed her callous side. She was a human rights activist who threw her pregnant, bruised and insulted daughter-in-law out of her house and ruined the future of her son. Khirad’s dialogue *“Mummy Yeh Aap Kya Keh Rahi Hain”* (Mother, what are you saying?!) has become a popular line in the contemporary speech amongst viewers of *Humsafar*. Fareeda

abused Khirad in episode 11: "*Pair ki khaakh ko sarr pe charha liya tha mere bete ne. Iss ghalti ko theek to karna tha. do kamre ke quarter mein rehne wali larki, ek sarkari school master ki beti meri bahu banegi?*" (My son had placed the dirt of feet on his head. So, I had to mend this mistake. The girl who lived in a two-room quarter and was the daughter of a government schoolmaster would be my daughter-in-law?) Fareeda challenged Khirad that her child will never get paternal acknowledgment. Fareeda's suppressed urge to rule her son's life was reflected her dialogue in episode 12: "*Iss ghar par mera hukam chalta hai. Yahan sirf wohi rehta hai jisse main rehne deti hoon. Bohat aish kar liya tumne. Mere zevar vapis karo mujhe.*" (This house is ruled by my order. Here, that person stays whom I allow to stay. You have had enough of luxuries. Return my jewels.) In the last episode, Ashar confronts Fareeda for ruining his life and she cries: "*Ashar, Poori duniya me sabse zyada mohabbat maine tumhi se to ki hai. Main chahti thi ke mere bete ki zindagi mein har cheez shaandaar ho, sabkuch tumhare mayaar ke mutabik ho.*" (Ashar, I have loved only you the most all my life. I wanted that everything in my son's life should be the best and praiseworthy, everything should be as per your standards.) In this way, Fareeda is portrayed as a very neurotic and complicated woman who remained passively positive at the beginning with a subtle negative admonition that she will harm the other characters. In the end, Fareeda went cuckoo and started hallucinating that spirits are coming to kill her.

Discourse analysis of '*Humsafar*' has surfaced a multi-layered research problem. *Humsafar* communicates the reinforcement of multiple, regressive, misogynic, patriarchal ideologies. Romanticism is treated with androcentric gaze that objectifies and delimits feminine agency. Androcentric gaze (also known as 'male gaze') normalizes the objectification of women from the perspective lens of a heterosexual man. The iconic romantic scene of Khirad wearing black *pishwas* (Fusion of Frock with Asian Traditional Trousers) , dancing in rain and husband gazing her with the song "*Woh Humsafar Tha*" played in the background is suggestive of the conventional romantic recipe. The individual identity struggles for all three women in the drama are overshadowed by formulaic romance and heightened melodrama. Female characters couldn't challenge the imposed patriarchy rather participate in normalizing it. There is the presence of a rigid dichotomy in female characterizations, resulting in polarized portrayals. Altagonist negotiates between bipolar portrayals but without a substantial scope of self or mutual liberation from stereotypical roles and gendered responsibilities. All three women revolve around the orbit of one man, Ashar. Fareeda ran an NGO for Human Rights, Khirad was pursuing M.Sc. in Mathematics, and Sarah was a career woman. But, the focus of their life was only Ashar. Women had no say in marriage and divorce. The female protagonist couldn't be economically empowered, despite being well educated. The antagonist Sarah was career oriented, independent woman who killed herself for one man. The altagonist Fareeda was a Human Rights Activist who committed inhuman deeds and lost control over her mind in the end. This dissolves their identity struggles without culminating to self-empowerment at various levels: economic, ethical, social, cultural, and emotional. Ending of soap opera is the most problematic. The female protagonist Khirad reconciled with her husband, who had thrown her out pregnant and helpless, due to mistrust. The idea of cultural imperialism is conveyed through the drama that western lifestyle symbolizes modernity and is superior to an eastern lifestyle that symbolizes conservatism. Cumulatively, all the regressive gender and cultural codes functional in *Humsafar* lead to the imposition of a "hetero-normative visual culture" on Indian audience.

Findings

The most watched and appreciated Pakistani television soap operas by 88% of Indian viewers are 'Humsafar,' 'Zindagi Gulzar Hai,' 'Aunn Zara' and 'Maat.' 12 percent of respondents in the old age bracket appreciated 'Dhoop Chhaon' which depicted life lessons of an old mother to her daughter. There are several reasons cited by Indian viewers for watching Pakistani soap operas. First, the stories are short and fast paced, often based on heart rending Urdu novels. Second, the stories have definite endings as compared to never ending Indian soap opera sagas. Third, the portrayals of characters are believable and relatable for Indian viewers. Fourth, the mellifluous original soundtracks and ornate use of colloquial Urdu and Punjabi is appreciated by North Indian viewers. Fifth, the backdrops in Pakistani soap operas are naturalistic and depiction of eastern dressing styles for both men and women are similar to the traditional Indian culture. Sixth, the social issues and cultural taboos depicted in Pakistani soap operas are familiar to Indian viewers. Above all, the absence of unrealistic scenarios, venomous plots hatched by evil vamps in Pakistani soap operas is appreciated by Indian viewers. All female respondents were asked if they found an authentic, Pakistani fashion house or boutique in their price and location range, would they be interested in buying those clothes? 87.50% of female respondents were very interested in buying Pakistani styled *shalwar kameez*, *palazzos*, *A-line kurtas*, Punjabi *khussas* (Handcrafted traditional footwear made up of vegetable-tanned leather), and *dupattas* (long scarf worn around neck with South Asian traditional dresses), if they are offered at an economical price.

Indian Viewers' Comparative Analysis of Indian Soap Operas and Pakistan's Soap Operas

Table 1. Respondents' comparison between Indian soap operas and Pakistani television soap operas

S.No.	Characteristics	Indian soap operas	Pakistani TV dramas
1.	Storyline	Fictitious	Realistic
2.	Characters	Unbelievable	Believable
3.	Duration	Never Ending	Definite Ending
4.	Pace of the Story	Slow	Fast
5.	Background Sets	Artificial	Natural
6.	Makeup	Heavy	Light
7.	Jewelry	Overloaded	Minimal
8.	Apparel	Gaudy	Ordinary
9.	Portrayal of Men	Unnatural	Realistic
10.	Portrayal of Women	Regressive	Regressive
11.	Background SFX	Loud & Melodramatic	Mellifluous
12.	Negative Characters	Witch-like characters	Grey shades
13.	Derived Use & Gratification	Time Pass	Lesson oriented

Cultivated Loyalty Shift in Indian Audience: Research findings indicated viewers' loyalty shift with 87.50% of female respondents and 66.66% of male respondents watching Pakistan's soap opera over Indian soaps. Compared to American soap operas, 67% of female viewers and 77% of male viewers preferred watching Pakistan's soap operas.

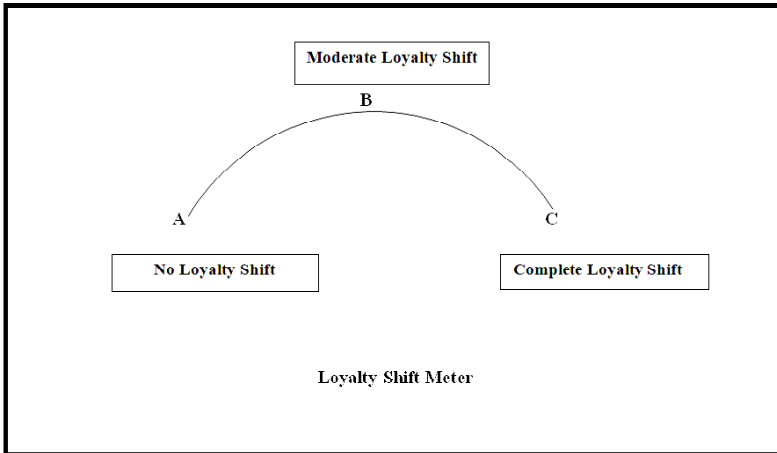


Figure 1: Loyalty Shift Meter for Indian audience's preference towards Pakistan's soap operas

In Figure 1 (above), **A** denotes no loyalty shift from Indian soap operas towards Pakistan's television dramas. This means that the viewer watches Pakistan's dramas but did not reduce the consumption of Indian soap operas or American TV shows watched as earlier. **B** denotes moderate loyalty shift towards Pakistan's television dramas. **C** denotes complete loyalty shift towards Pakistan's television dramas. **(A-B)** denotes that the viewer watches Pakistan's television dramas and has reduced the consumption of Indian soap operas or American TV shows that viewer watched earlier. **(B-C)** Denotes moderate to almost complete loyalty shift. This means that the viewer has almost shifted his/her loyalty from Indian and American TV shows towards Pakistan's television dramas. The study found that 9.0% of respondents noted no change in their loyalty as viewers. 54% of respondents noted a moderate change in their loyalty shift as viewers. This included 27% respondents who reduced their consumption of Indian soap operas and shifted their loyalty and another set of 27% respondents who noticed a stronger shift towards Pakistan's soap operas and very occasionally watched anything other than that on television. 36.66% of respondents noted complete change in their viewership loyalty towards Pakistani soap operas.

Categorization of Viewers based on Cultivation Theory

Based on interviewed respondents' consumption of Pakistan's soap operas, they were categorized as light, moderate, and heavy viewers as per the Cultivation theory (1976). This help in finding eight respondents for qualitative telephonic interviews.

Table 2: Categorization of Indian viewers based on Cultivation Theory

Consumption of television soap operas per day	Nature of the viewer	Male respondents	Female respondents
½ - 2 hours	Light	4	7
2-4 hours	Moderate	3	8
More than 4 hours	Heavy	4	7

Twenty-nine percent female respondents and 44% of male respondents were light viewers who watched Pakistan's television soap operas for half an hour to the max. 2 hours a day. 33.33% of female respondents and 33.33% of male respondents were moderate viewers who spent 2 to 4 hours a day watching Pakistan's soap operas. The rest of 29% of female respondents and 44% of male respondents were categorized as heavy viewers who spent more than 4 hours a day consuming Pakistan's soap operas.

Variables Defining the Ideal Portrayals Of Modern Women in Television Soap Operas of Pakistan

Self-identity independent of men, decision making ability, educated and skilled for employment, a voice in marriage and divorce, emotionally anchored, challenging social orthodoxies, fashionable, owns a social circle, syncing modernity with traditional values, progressively eastern cultured and aware of her rights and duties.

These variables aided in defining the ideal portrayal of modern women in television soap operas of Pakistan as:

"Feminine representations struggling to create and sustain self-identity by positioning themselves outside the orbit of male dependency." The modern women of Pakistani soap opera makes concerted efforts to empower herself and other women in the drama at various levels: economic, social and moral. This is made possible through active perusal of education including legal and social awareness, employment before and after marriage. Women in Pakistani soap operas are at the crossroads of east-west cultures. In other words, the portrayed modern Pakistani woman embraces the native culture while attempting to challenge the social orthodoxies within the boundaries of good ethics and religious beliefs.

Variables Describing Popular Culture Represented in Television Soap Operas of Pakistan

Polygamy, *vatta-satta*, *vani*, patriarchy, misogyny, gender bias, hybrid languages in Punjab, culture of living in joint families, modern eastern dressing styles including *pishwas*, *khussas*, *kaftans*, *pathani* suits, palazzos, celebration of *chaand raat* with henna, *chooriyan* and cooking rice pudding, child bride's issues, divorces on giving birth to female progeny, getting married to first cousin, practice of *vatta-satta* and *vani* for marriages, dealing with social taboos like male impotency, parenting a transgender and inter-faith marriages

These variables aided in defining the depiction of popular culture in Pakistan's television soap operas as:

"Dramatized depiction of a conservatively progressive atmosphere wherein characters are positioned at the crossroads of east-west cultural value systems. The Pakistani soap opera characters celebrate traditional lifestyle and struggle with the deep rooted presence of social orthodoxies like polygamy, *vatta-satta*, child marriage etc. Pakistani soap opera stories also communicate behavior change on cultural taboo subjects like male impotency, parenting a transgender and inter-faith marriages."

Problematic Issues in Current Portrayals of Women and Popular Culture in Pakistani TV Soap Operas

The foremost crucial issue is a frequent depiction of bigamy or trigamy, a practice rooted in patriarchy that weakens female characters who participate in normalizing it by resigning to their fate. Female characters are represented as dependent ones, living with the fear and anxiety of being divorced by their husband. Second is the representation of gender injustice as a punishment for not producing a male child is cited as a critical barrier to women empowerment. The portrayal of Rafia in '*Zindagi Gulzar Hai*' was a living example of a woman who gave birth to three daughters and was left by her husband who remarried in pursuit of a son.

Moreover, the least significant on female progeny's education and employment and keeping them domesticated and unemployed is problematic. Indian viewers appraised the character of Kashaf in '*Zindagi Gulzar Hai*' who empowered herself through excelling in academics and seeking employment before marriage. Depiction of certain orthodox practices prevalent in the rural areas of Pakistan subjugates the positions of female characters in Pakistani soap operas. For instance, the practice of *vatta-satta* discussed with special reference to the soap opera '*Bilquees Kaur*' which involved marrying one's daughter in a family and getting a daughter-in-law from the same family. This practice deeply subjugates women in both families.

Missing portrayals of female comic characters were cited as a barrier to women liberation on television by senior aged respondents as they remembered watching the vintage comic Pakistani dramas on VCR back in the 1990s namely *Bakra Qiston Par*, *Fifty-Fifty* and *Ankahi*, etc. wherein women played comic roles alongside men. Comedy liberates the female projections because it requires women to be loud and unapologetic. The stereotypical media projection of Pakistani women has been recently broken by Pakistan's first social media comedienne, Faiza Saleem. She is the woman who has trained the sub-continent's first female comedy troupe called '*The Khawatoons*.' (Saxena, 2017, p. 1). She has made significant contributions to the Pakistani discourse on gender stereotyping and body shaming using comic videos shared on social media.

Saleem believes "women should stand up for themselves and fight the deep-rooted unfair traditions that have dictated their lives so far. South Asian societies are riddled with hypocrisy because women don't question the oppressive practices they are conditioned into" (Kedia, 2016, p. 2).

Concept of 'cultural imperialism' is conveyed in Pakistani soap operas '*Zindagi Gulzar Hai*' and '*Humsafar*' by depicting antagonists' adoption of western culture in dressing, language and behavior giving a snooty vibe to the domesticated and eastern cultured protagonists. On the contrary, the cultural imperialists like Sara of '*Humsafar*' and Sophia of '*Aahista-Aahista*' are always get punished for being modern, and they end up losing their lives and loved ones in the end.

The stage of self-empowerment for female characters comes after disappointment in marriage or a woman coming to terms with her husband's infidelity. Therefore, infidelity or marital discord can become the starting points of unwanted but forced liberation for women. However, there are certain portrayals wherein women endure infidelity and bitterly accept verbal and emotional abuse. For example, the portrayal of Khirad in '*Humsafar*' was very weak because she could not empower herself economically despite being discarded by her husband under inhuman circumstances. Female protagonists like Zenia from '*Malal*' or Sophia from '*Aahista-Aahista*' stay emotionally malnourished in the pursuit of nourishing

their relationships with their spouse. Women's focus is least on emotional empowerment through self-care. One fine day, an epiphany hits them that these relationships with men are very hollow and lack security and closure. Therefore, female characters in Pakistani soap operas need to break the shackles of male dependency and empower themselves, financially and emotionally.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Pakistan's television soap operas have functioned as a digital doorway for communicating the vintage and contemporary portrayals of Pakistani women and popular Pakistani culture to Indian viewers. This study exemplifies how television soap operas on the digital platforms transcend national borders, languages, and culture and have the potential to bridge the knowledge gap and bring the viewing audience in India closer to the portrayed culture. The study discovers reasons for the growing popularity of Pakistan's soap operas amongst Indian audience (short and fast-paced stories, definite endings, believable characters speaking colloquial languages, naturalistic backgrounds and mellifluous music, etc.) leading to a cultivated viewing loyalty shift of varying degrees with female respondents interested in purchasing Pakistani fashion apparel. Respondents connected with the Pakistani soap opera content as they depicted social issues like gender bias, child marriage, women liberation, etc. were relevant in the Indian context as well except frequent depiction of polygamy. The study summarizes that the contemporary dramatized portrayals of Pakistani women are at the conflicting crossroads of eastern and western popular cultures. Reviewed literature highlighted a gradual regression in the strength of feminine portrayals, considering the vintage women roles used to be confident, assertive, independent and strong in voice and action and the contemporary television drama in Pakistan has become misogynic, portraying women as weak, dependent and victimized. Based on garnered responses, the study concludes that portrayals of women in Pakistan's soap operas are conservatively progressive, struggling to overcome misogynic practices, challenging gender biases and initiating behavior change on taboo subjects like male impotence, parenting a transgender and inter-faith marriages.

Discourse Analysis of feminine characters in the most celebrated television soap opera of Pakistan '*Humsafar*' has surfaced a multi-layered research problem that it communicates multiple, regressive, misogynic ideologies, rigid dichotomies in female portrayals, treatment of romanticism with androcentric gaze, objectifying and limiting feminine agency. Concept of 'cultural imperialism' is conveyed in two of the most appraised Pakistani television soap operas '*Zindagi Gulzar Hai*' and '*Humsafar*' by depicting antagonists' adoption of western culture in dressing, language and behavior as superior to protagonists' adoption of domesticated eastern culture which is a problematic depiction rooted in colonial complex. The author discovered the term '*Altagonist*' for the feminine character category that begins as passive positive ones, gradually altering their positive shade with several shades of the negative leading the story forward. Indian audience identified several problems in dramatized portrayals of women intertwined with the popular culture of Pakistan like voiceless women on polygamy, inter-linkage of gender injustice and divorce, lack of emphasis on women education and empowerment and less comic roles for women. Author's participatory observations concluded that iconic female characters like Khirad from '*Humsafar*' give less importance to economic and emotional empowerment till they face either infidelity or marital discord as the starting points of forced liberation from male dependency.

Conclusively, the research paper summarizes an exploratory attempt to re-open participatory inter-cultural communication on the consumption of Pakistan's television soap operas as valuable assets of South Asian popular culture. This research study will largely benefit the research scholars and academicians in the field of journalism and mass communication, particularly television and culture studies, visual arts, Indo-Pak entertainment studies as well as the global cultural exchange studies and students of Political Science and Sociology.

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