



## Female Representation in Pakistani Digital Media: A Comparative Critical Feministic Study of Rehman's "Mere Pas Tum Ho" & Ahmed's "Sinf-e-Ahan"

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aims to explore the portrayal of female characters by male and female writers in Pakistani digital media. Hence, the primary objective of this study is to figure out which gender is focused to show the strong and positive side of women. Meanwhile, the secondary objective is to trace the gender stereotypes in the context of the two particular dramas. Fairclough (1992) model of critical discourse analysis has been applied along with Beauvoir (1997) notion of feminism as the framework of the study. Two Pakistani dramas namely "Mere Pas Tum Ho" and "Sinf-e-Ahan" have been the source of data. Meanwhile, a particular sample of twenty scenes from ten episodes of each drama has been selected through purposive sampling. However, the findings revealed that in Pakistani Digital media, male writers intend to portray women as negative, disloyal, passive, and emotionally frail creatures while on the other hand, female writers are trying to show the positive side of women by presenting them as strong and independent ones who are challenging patriarchal norms by pursuing their careers and fighting against every unjust thing they see happening around.

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## 1. Introduction

In the present era, digital media is being perceived as a greater tool of social change as it promises to show the world where a wide range of content related to all issues faced by male and female characters is presented. Hence, it has the potential to reshape the social attitudes and belief systems of the people who watch its content, and in the same way, it must acknowledge its ethical responsibility to maintain the balance between the two genders whom the story revolves around but the situation becomes critical when it seems determined to show the positive face of one gender by highlighting the flaws of the other (Ali, 2015). Digital media must ensure the eradication of all types of discrimination between genders and other sources of violation in a society (Sharda, 2014). Pakistani digital media is not exceptional where most of the dramas are written by male writers who take great pleasure in showing the female characters as just domestic creatures with no financial and emotional stability or are portrayed just as beauty objects and a great source of opposite gender's enjoyment (Isanović, 2006). Meanwhile, male characters are portrayed as financially and emotionally stable, positive, tolerant, and most importantly homemakers who care a lot about their families but unfortunately, the girl comes into their lives betrays them, and spoils their lives. Hence, women are going to be projected negatively by male writers which affects the overall picture in the real world (Sharma, 2012).

However, with the passage of time, women are also determined to distinguish themselves as professionals in various fields, and drama writing is one of them. Despite a continuous attempt by Patriarchy to harm the positive image of women by depicting them negatively, there are also a few dramas being shown on Pakistani television written by female

writers. In such dramas, the leading female characters are presented as positive, strong, and determined having a lot of capacity in themselves which always keeps them in survival mode in the patriarchal society they are living in and to raise their voice against all the unfair things happening against other female characters (Anjum, Shafiq, & Khalid, 2023). Zanjabeel Asim is such a big name who gave a lot of serials based on women empowerment in the Pakistani media industry like "Cheekh" and "Fraud". In both dramas, despite going through a lot of suffering at the hands of patriarchy, the protagonists did not give up rather at the end of the story, they succeeded in getting justice against all the unfair things that happened to them and the other female characters (Niaz, 2019).

### **1.1. Synoptic overview of the Dramas under this Investigation**

As the researcher has mentioned above there are two dramas of Pakistani television written by two different genders are interested in this in terms of the depiction of female characters and the gender stereotypes. So, the storyline of both dramas has been briefly discussed below.

#### **1.1.1. Mere Pas Tum Ho (2019-2020)**

The drama is written by a most controversial male writer on Pakistani television none other than Khalil Ur Rehman Qamar who has been highly criticized because of his misogynistic approach and abusive remarks about women and feminism. The storyline of the particular drama revolves around the lives of a middle-class couple namely Mehwish and Danish having different mind-sets which drifts them apart slowly because Danish is an honest person who madly loves his wife and kid but unfortunately his materialistic wife betrays him and leaves him after seven years of a happily married life for a man who could give her a luxurious life. Danish cannot bear the betrayal of his wife and gets devoid of his life in the course of a heart attack. In this way, the writer has tried to show the negative picture of women to society how selfish, emotionally frail, and materialistic they are having little concern for their homes and families, and how they take a second to betray someone.

#### **1.1.2. Sinf-e-Ahan**

The second drama under this study is written by a female writer Umera Ahmad, who is highly read and admired by the masses and is considered a prominent postmodern time in Pakistan. Her popularity touched its peak when a project entitled "Sinf -e-Ahan" written by her was aired on ARY Digital in 2021. The story revolves around the lives of six girls coming from a different background and walks of life but having the same purpose which is to abandon the daily female duties to do something greater than themselves and to raise the dignity of their families by responding to their country's call to perform their duty as equal as the male soldiers do and bring a great fame to their country. So, through this drama, the writer has shown the strong and positive side of women that women are also an important part of society, and their lives are not only limited to shopping, makeup, and other activities like this. Based on the above discussion the present study is an attempt to reveal the fact that how female characters are depicted in these two popular Pakistani dramas written by writers of different genders through this research, the researcher has also tried to explore the gender stereotypes used by the male authors and their purpose behind the presentation of the negative side of women. Hence, the main objectives of the study are:

1. To explore the depiction of female characters in the work of male and female writers in the context of these two particular dramas under this investigation.
2. To trace the gender stereotypes in the work of male drama writers.

## **2. Literature Review**

Bhargava (2009) argued that gender stereotypes can be perceived as a psychological process that laid the foundations of a set of societal beliefs about a particular gender. Hence, it can be said that the stereotypical representation of female characters and the patriarchal belief system prevailing in a particular society are interconnected to each other. Through his study, the researcher further suggested that a critical analysis of the language of such dramas is crucial to unmask such a patriarchal agenda. Ahmed and Wahab (2019) investigated the representation of female leading roles in the context of Pakistani feature films. The study was qualitative in which the researcher employed the textual method of analysis along with the feminist framework. The findings revealed the female characters were assigned different roles respectively protagonist, antagonist, and prostitutes.

Huda and Ali (2015) explored the depiction of female characters in two domains of media studies that are respectively print media and audio-visual mode. Hence, in the result section, the researchers asserted that a conscious attempt is being made by the media in terms of the depiction of women as morally corrupt to affect their overall image in the real world. Ashfaq and Shafiq (2018) in their research claimed that dramas play a greater role in shaping social belief systems but unfortunately, some popular dramas on Pakistani television are looking very busy in the projection of female characters as a submissive, dependent, and frail thing that bears every unfair and unjust thing happened against her just to save her marriage and to be called out a good and loyal wife. Niaz (2019) conducted a qualitative research study to investigate the projection of women in the context of selected Pakistani dramas. However, the findings revealed that the recent dramas are not interested in showing a positive image of women to society rather they have a greater concern to present them as something loaded with plenty of negativity. Ibrahim, Amin, and Rehman (2019) conducted a study to explore the perception of common women about the victimization of their gender in the context of Pakistani private channels. The findings revealed that 56% of those women were independent and showed a strong dislike towards the showcasing of traditional gender roles of women by raising their point that there should be a balance and the writers and makers must be focused to show the strong side of female characters as well who is positive in every aspect having the courage to stand up against the patriarchal standards made for the women. Hence, the research gap of this study is that both dramas written by two different genders have rarely been examined comparatively by any researcher in Pakistan yet and this thing makes this study unique and authentic.

### **3. Methodology**

This study is based on the qualitative method and the reason for the selection of this particular paradigm is its flexible approach that allows a researcher to have a deep insight into the phenomenon under the particular investigation (Kumar, 2018). Fairclough (1992) notion of critical discourse analysis has been applied as the framework of the study along with (Beauvoir, 1997) feministic perspective. However, two Pakistani dramas that had been aired on the ARY channel are the source of data. As, far as the sample of the study is concerned, a particular sample of twenty scenes from both dramas has been drawn by applying the purposive sampling technique.

### **4. Analysis**

This section follows two Sub-sections mentioned below;

#### **4.1. Mere Pass Tum ho Analysis**

"I have dealt with the anti-corruption department as well and I don't fear them either. Besides the necklace, I'm also thinking about purchasing Monti's car" These lines represent women a kind of gender whose happiness is associated with material things. To raise their status and show off in their social circle women pressurize their husbands and demand external facilities. They don't think even the economic conditions of their males and whether they can fulfill their demands or not. To fulfill societal duties and women's desires these downtrodden males have to take unethical means. In these lines, women are presented as oppressors who compel their husbands for the attainment of their desires. Through the character of Mehwish, all the women are depicted as avaricious and instigate their husbands to do wrong deeds for the attainment of their desires. When Mehwish asks her husband to buy a necklace and a car for her to raise their social status Danish uses unfair means to earn money even without the fear of being caught. It is portrayed in such a way that there is always a woman behind a man's crime.

"She is an ill-mannered woman she does so much doubt! If she would be here, she might have catch him with his collar. She is mad if she would've seen him with Maria, then she might have started shouting that you are doing flirt with your secretary."

Women are portrayed as skeptical and mistrust their husbands. Women are shown as jealous and possessive and cannot bear their husbands talking to someone else. Being judgmental and emotionally volatile are some of the stereotypes that are associated with them. It is considered that women should be polite and emotionally restrained even after knowing about the males' extramarital affairs and if they resist are considered misfits in the society.

Maham, Shehwar Ahmad's wife is considered mannerless because she humiliates him after catching him flirting with a secretary. She doesn't fulfill societal expectations in which a woman should be passive, calm, a forgiver, and a silent spectacle on whatever her husband does.

"If you will do a job there, then I will have a problem there means? I am talking about Mr. Shehwar."

It is considered that women should be confined to their homes and should take care of their children and homes. Women are not allowed in a male-dominated society to choose their profession and the place where they want to work. They have to seek the permission of their males for the work. If they work with males in a typical society they have to face their character assassination. Due to the lack of trust which males have mostly women have to suffer by sacrificing their profession. Due to the bad intentions of Mr. Shehwar, Mehwish has to face the skepticism of her husband again and again.

"I was seeing that you are so precious, even then a man is trying to purchase you by giving salary of one lac and a car".

In our society, women are objectified as a commodity which can be bought. This line presents the societal tendencies to commodify women according to their perceived value. In a patriarchal society, it is regarded that a woman's affection and love can be bought by offering her money and a car. Women are considered covetous and can have an affair with anyone in exchange for money. In every society, it is believed that women should depend on men for their financial needs. Whenever a woman tries to stand on her own feet and begins to earn more than her husband is regarded as a loose character.

"Where is his mother? I mean this is the admission of her only child, mothers are usually very emotional on these moments. Yes she was very emotional too, but she did not get leave from her job, because it's her new job."

In society, it is very difficult for women to maintain a balance between their family and work. These lines portray that working women are unable to take proper care of their families. To perform well in their jobs they even neglect their children and their important occasions. This may be due to the workload, improper working policies, and unsupportive attitude of the owners at the working places. But by ignoring all these difficulties and instead of supporting it is considered that women should perfectly manage their household and work duties. Through the character of Mehwish is portrayed that when women begin to work outside they become so engaged in making their careers that they ignore their household responsibilities.

"I understand but I can't go, if he will come to know, he will mad at me"

This line reflects the power dynamics and the impact of societal expectations and conventional gender norms on women's decision-making. In a relationship a man usually holds the power to make any decision and a woman has to obey this decision. A woman has to prioritize her male partner's feelings over her professional choices. When Mehwish's boss offers her to go with him on a business trip she can't make her decision independently due to the fear of displeasing Danish and facing felonious consequences.

"She did a mistake if a girl finds the buyer like you, she becomes happy to know her price and does mistake, and it is realized later that once a girl is sold she becomes cheap in price"

This dialogue presents a very common stereotype related to women in which their worth is measured through economic transactions. A woman's worth and autonomy are damaged when it is tied to external factors. Women are objectified as commodities whose value drops down when they make some wrong decision. The expectations made by society and gender differences demean and devalue them. Mehwish's decision to live her life with Shehwar Ahmad demeans her value because she goes against society's norms and makes decisions for herself. After that, she is regarded as a cheap, useless commodity whose value drops after it is sold.

“Women usually realize that their previous love was a false decision, after stepping into marriage.”

It is considered that women lack in making sound decisions related to their relationships until they get married. It suggests that in their romantic relations, women lack awareness. They become so obsessed with love that they don't even think about whether the person is suitable for them or not and after marriage they realize that their decision to get married was wrong. Through the character of Mehwish, all the women's decision-making skills related to their relations are criticized.

“She has forgotten that you both did a love marriage, or you both have a kid, and some dreams which you have stored. You might have stored, but she has jumped from your plane to fulfill those dreams”

Through these lines, women are being criticized for pursuing their aspirations. In a patriarchal society, it is regarded as the duty of women that they should prefer their families over their goals. They don't have the liberty like men to pursue their dreams along with taking care of their relations. Traditional stereotypes have confined them so much that those who try to achieve their life desires are regarded as mean and selfish. To change her lifestyle and fulfill her desires when Mehwish decides to marry Shehwar Ahmad she is badly criticized for saying that she forgot her husband, child, and her duties towards them.

“What you might think about is that your husband can not buy an ordinary necklace for you.....my status is showing me a thumb, Mehwish”

Women are assumed as such kind of a gender who have a materialistic attitude towards everything. They prefer money over every relation and to gauge their worth material possessions are vital. These lines convey the idea that a relationship's success and worth are measured by the gifts that women receive from their husbands'. Women are depicted as avaricious who tease their husbands for material things without caring about their social status. Husband's poor social income puts them into self-hatred and a feeling of uselessness for not being able to fulfill their wives' desires.

#### **4.2. Sinf-e-Ahan Analysis**

“We'll have to change our stories and their names at least for my daughter, I can't have marriage as a final prize because marriage isn't the ending of a story”.

This dialogue states the importance of stories that we tell our daughters. In these stories traditionally women are portrayed as meek and passive characters who always need men in grueling situations. Through the stories, women are tried to convince that their ultimate goal in life is getting married to men and being settled in their lives. But in this dialogue, this conventional idea is completely rejected and portrayed that there are many things to do in life except getting married. There is a need to promote stories that empower women and reevaluate social customs and storytelling conventions. Through these stories, their minds can be transformed and the next generations can be made independent.

“She will make her family proud. People will take her name with respect.”

This line acknowledges women's potential to bring respect to their families through the achievement of their goals. Our society has restricted women from earning names in different fields by limiting their roles to household and family duties. Going beyond the traditional roles that consider women's worth only with her relations and by valuing their abilities and accomplishments our nation can exceed in many fields. Overall this line focuses on the independence and autonomy of women to do what they want to do in their lives. They can gain respect and pride for their families through their achievements by shaking all the stereotypes. Arzoo Daniel who belongs to the Christian community makes her community proud by becoming the first army officer.

“Where is she? She is beating some boys on the street”.

Women are always considered fragile, incompetent, erratic, reliant, exposed, and sensitive creatures. According to the traditional stereotype, they need men to protect themselves due to their delicate nature. But this line emphasizes women's bravery, assertiveness, and unwillingness to accept persecution. Women are strong enough to stand against harassment and to confront the wrongdoers by challenging the traditional narrative which portrays women as passive victims. One of the characters Arzoo Daniel, instead of becoming a helpless recipient resists and combats against such behavior. Her act of beating boys shows her strength and assertiveness by discouraging societal norms that prevent women from protecting themselves.

"It is after wearing this uniform that I have felt for the first time that if I am a female, I am worthy of respect. I can do anything, there is a lot besides falling in love, having affairs, getting married, and living a life full of compromises".

Working women are regarded as more confident than housewives. Job or any kind of work transforms women's perception related to themselves and gives them the belief to embrace new challenges, take advantage of the opportunities, and excel in new fields. Their work, abilities, and achievements increase their worth and respect in the typical society where respect is associated with the male gender. This line rejects the notion that in our society only men can do certain jobs and can make their names in it but women are equally capable of doing those jobs and excelling in those fields. Women can shine in every field except doing stereotypical jobs such as marrying, loving someone, having affairs, and compromising in every situation.

"Wonderful my blood has increased out of happiness, she will increase our tribe's and family's dignity more after passing out from there."

This dialogue depicts the positive portrayal of women and the celebration of their achievements in non-traditional fields. This line indicates support and acknowledgment of the community people towards women's achievements. Women's success in their fields not only increases their dignity and honor but also becomes a cause of pride for their whole community and tribe. One of the main characters Pariwesh Jamal belonging to a tribal area brings dignity and respect to her tribe after becoming the army officer and winning the best shooter award. Women can also cause a source of pride and dignity as men.

"PMA taught me everything, Mom. Being afraid, being pressurized, bending, and not being able to talk to anyone, I have thrown out everything. But we should speak for our rights."

In a patriarchal society, women face different difficulties for survival such as gender discrimination, violence, harassment, depression, and fear of speaking their problems. Overall the tone reflects empowerment and strength despite all the challenges. Such kinds of jobs enable women to overthrow conventional rules, and societal pressures and stand on their own identity. It makes women able to speak up for their rights and against oppression even in those circumstances where they face challenges. Arzoo Daniel who was living a miserable life becomes so much confident that she doesn't fear to bear her harassers openly in the market.

"Even grandmother has realized that girls can't be forced to get married anymore. They will only be married where they want to be married."

In a traditional society, women don't have any right to get married according to their own will. These lines reflect women's autonomy in making their life decisions by their selves. There is a change in societal traditions within the generations. It conveys a deviation from the forceful historical marriages to the contemporary viewpoint that gives women the liberty to choose their companions on their own. Women's consent and autonomy are necessary for their life matters and also while choosing their life partners.

"Dad, we just have to change the tire. I can do it but you know my back. It's okay. I'll do it. It's a car tire, not a truck. I could even change a truck's tire"

It is regarded that men can only do automotive work. But in these lines, a character Mahjabeen Mastaan takes the task of changing the tire on herself by setting away all the gender-based restraints. Gender cannot be a determining factor in anyone's way of performing tasks that are considered only suitable for one gender. Skills and abilities should be used to measure anyone's competence. There is no job or work that women cannot do the only thing that prevents women from going side by side with men is the traditional rules.

"That it is our women who make us invincible"

Women play an essential role in giving strength to the whole human beings. This line overthrows the traditional conventions that relegate women to secondary roles and admires the contribution of women in maintaining strength and invincibility. Strength and resilience are associated with men but it is in fact due to the traditional norms women could never get fair chances to prove themselves. Certain roles and qualities should not be associated with one gender but women's competence should be accepted in those areas which are traditionally overlooked by men. There should be a change in societal norms, and traditional gender norms to advocate equality.

"Likewise, one's whole family is behind a successful woman, it is a woman behind a successful man."

This line throws light on the importance of familial and a woman's support in the success of a woman. It is considered that intrinsically women don't support and traditionally are the enemies or contenders of each other. But this line shows women's importance of cooperation in the uplifting and success of one another. This positive influence contributes to the personal and professional growth of each other. Overall this dialogue shows a constructive and empowering perspective of women's relations by showing that success cannot be achieved alone.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

This study was conducted to explore how male and female writers represent women through the lens of media and from the analysis, it became evident that male writer portrays women as weak, unfaithful, selfish, dependent, money-minded, and cheaters while female shows women as brave, ambitious, independent and career-oriented. Drama serial "Mere Pass Tum Ho" the writer portrays men as heroes with positive and sympathetic images and women as villains. It depicts those women ideal, who stay at their homes and look after families and those 'rebels' who defy social stereotypes. When Mehwish decides to stand on her own feet by joining Shehwar Ahmad's company she has to bear the skeptical nature of her husband. In this drama objectification of women is very evident, the writer objectifies women as commodities that can be bought and sold. Women are shown as avaricious and only care for wealth, social status, and material possessions without caring for the internal emotions of their loved ones. Women are shown as competitors of each other for male attention and love. On the other hand, female writers through the drama "Sinf-e-Aahan change people's perceptions about women, from those seeing them as helpless or insignificant beings to those of them as disputed creatures who do not accept social stereotypes. It empowers women by breaking the stereotype of only boys joining the army. All six main characters undergo the same hardships and training process as the male to achieve their goals. They break the conventional image of women as being weak and meek to becoming strong enough to face the challenges of life. This drama shows women's identity solely without being linked to any relation and represents women as a source of support for each other instead of being competitors. It portrays women as independent and strong enough to counterblow their harassers without anyone's help.

### **5.1. Future Recommendations**

1. It will provide the ground for researchers to find out how intersectionality is reflected through the writings of male and female writers.
2. Future researchers can explore how the writings of male and female writers related to the portrayal of female characters impact the minds of audiences.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has successfully revealed how male and female writers portray women differently in their writings. Male writer portrays women as passive, disloyal, characterless, and avaricious whereas female writer portrays them as active, brave, undefeatable, loyal, virgin, and helpful towards each other. In "Mere pass tum ho" women are portrayed as commodities, objects of physical beauty, and a source of delight and charm for males whose duty is to stay at home and take care of families and children. Whereas in the drama "Sin-e-Ahan women are not confined to their homes but actively participate in the country's welfare. Male writer develops female characters in the orbicular of social norms and portrays females as a cause of shame while female writer breaks all the stereotypes and proves their characters as a source of pride for their community.

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