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Article:	Rethinking Gender Roles: Perception of Female Viewers of Pakistani Television Dramas
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Abstract

Television drama is always an attraction for women. It has considerably contributed in defining gender roles to its viewers. This study was aimed to investigate that how females from different socioeconomic backgrounds perceive and interpret gender roles shown in Pakistani television drama. For data collection qualitative research strategy was applied. Data was collected by conducting eight focus groups. Each group consisted of eight participants (females) aged 20-40 years. Emergent themes from the data were non stereotypic representation of gender roles in Pakistani Television drama. This study concluded that tendency of Pakistani TV drama to redefine gender roles have contributed in conformity with the change in perception of female viewers interpreting gender roles shown in these dramas.

Keywords: Gender roles, Television drama, Perception, Non stereotypic

Introduction

Television drama is one of the most popular genres when it comes to entertainment industry. Pakistani Television drama has earned considerable popularity not only in Pakistan but also in neighboring countries. From very conventional issues to most novel stories are covered in Pakistani TV dramas. These dramas are not seen as mere entertainment they also influence the way viewers think, behave and respond. Most of the audience for TV drama is comprised of women particularly housewives. Contemporary audience research has confirmed the gendered distinction that women are mostly interested to watch TV dramas while men prefer to watch news based programs (Wood, 2015). Most women prefer to watch television in their leisure time. They not only exhibit connection with the cast, story, acting, dramas based on serious social issues but get significant influence also. They embrace what they see (Hasan, Akif & Subhani & Imtiaz, 2012). Since last two decades TV industry exhibited not only advancement in production techniques but the content has also developed. Television drama contributes in redefining gender roles. There seem to be multi-dimensional complex roles shown in TV drama. They appear to be moving from stereotypic to non-stereotypic roles. This transition deserves to be studied. There are certain issues associated with gender roles that are discussed in dramas that used to be taboo in our society previously. Content of television drama is now switching from being stereotypic to non-stereotypic. In most of the dramas gender roles seems to be unconventional. "Pakistani television drama has changed its presentation which is the need of time" (Huma, 2015). Television drama attempts to provide the opportunity to its viewers to rethink gender roles by giving different meanings to them. This study is under taken to investigate the attitude and perceptions of the female viewers and to understand how they interpret gender roles in Pakistani Television dramas.

Literature Review

Investigating gender based attitudes and beliefs of emerging adults Behm-Morawitz & Mastro (2008) concluded that female roles are presented to be more aggressive as compare to male roles in teen movie secondly their movie watching habits are directly connected to the "negative stereotypes" about gender roles and female friendships.

It is believed traditionally that gender role segregation is done on the basis of biological traits. Femininity is associated with being weak, irrational and submissive while traits associated with males are strength, rational and protective (Tyson, 2006).

Gender roles may vary in different societies and cultures on the basis of socio-cultural construction (Chusna, Taufiqurrohman & Suzanna, 2017). Nawaz (2006) stated that television drama had encountered criticism for broadcasting immoral content. Television dramas are promoting extramarital affairs. They are weakening the very basic unit of family i.e. husband and wife as most of the content shown in dramas seems to "legitimize the illegitimate relation" (Arafat, Sial & Zafar, 2020).

Tabassum and Amin (2021) concluded that independent and career oriented women are shown to be bad women. Such stereotypic representations should be discouraged because people tend to believe what is shown on Television.

There had been numerous debates on representation of women on TV. Zemach & Cohen (2015) in a study titled "Perception of Gender Equality on Television and in Social Reality" concluded that women representation on TV is more stereotypical as compare to the social reality where she is perceived to be equal to men. The believe media still lag behind to allocate societal roles. It tends to represent more conventional roles.

Gow (1996) analyzed gender roles in 100 music videos and concluded that women are underrepresented. He also stated that if women are depicted to be strong, independent and professional she is associated with negative image.

Signorielli (1990) examined impact of television regarding images related to gender roles. Numerous studies pointed out one basic finding that gender roles are

underrepresented and predisposed to be orthodox, even with a number of genre depicting more liberated view of gender roles. Perception of occupational roles and gender-typed behaviors, tendency to develop recognition for specific characters, idea for counter-stereotypical portrayals and inculcating attitudes for gender role were the specific areas that were focused in these studies and most of the time they were stereotypic.

Mínguez (2010) stated that variables that best explained gender roles are age, education and marital status. They are needed to be studied to understand different lifestyles.

Smith (2010) concluded in one of her studies conducted to examine gender representation in cinematic content that movies that involved more women as producers, directors or writers represent females more frequent and in better roles as compare to those made by males.

Tehseem, Sibtain, & Obaid (2018) studied that advertisements play strong role in disseminating stereotypic gender roles in society. They found that most of the advertisements reinforce male chauvinism where male roles are portrayed as strong, decisive and dominating whereas females are shown as facilitating sexual objects.

Above literature shed light on the fact that viewers particularly females are influenced by the gender roles set by television. This study focuses to have an insight how female viewers perceive and interpret gender roles shown in Pakistani television drama. The study intends to seek answer to the following research question.

RQ1: How do female viewers perceive and interpret gender roles shown in Pakistani Television drama?

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative research strategy was applied to gather data. Since women constitute most of the viewership for Pakistani television drama it is extremely important to understand how they perceive and interpret gender roles shown in TV dramas. In order to develop in depth understanding about the phenomena interpretive approach was used (Silverman 2013).

Focus Group Discussions

Eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with eight participants in each group. Four FGDs comprised of 32 females from higher socio economic status and four were comprised of 32 females from lower socio economic status. Participants aged 20-40 were selected using purposive sampling from the city of Lahore. Purpose for opting FGDs was to encourage the participants to freely express their thoughts and opinion about what they understand about gender roles by watching TV dramas. Participants selected from two different socioeconomic backgrounds helped the researcher to understand and identify that how different socioeconomic statuses influence the way participants understand and interpret gender roles. A discussion guide was prepared comprised of questions that revolved around the research question to be explored. Each focus group lasted from 60 to 90 minutes.

Data Analysis

Digital voice recorder along with note taking was used to record the entire conversation held during FGDs. It was ensured that no data goes missing. All data acquired from FGDs was carefully transcribed. After transcription codes were developed. Codes were then grouped to develop categories and later themes and sub-themes as shown in the given table 1. Thematic analysis was done to analyze the data.

Table 1: List of themes, sub- themes and codes

Themes	Sub themes	Major codes
Non stereotypic role of women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careerism • Financial stability • Women as decision makers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women now have choice to prefer career over marriage • Women require financial

		<p>stability to secure her future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting married is just part of life and not life itself • They take their own decisions • They are gold diggers
Non stereotypic role of Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional exploitation • Subject to manipulation • Loyal and supportive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are weak and confused • They are unable to maintain balance between relations • They can be misled easily • Their decisions can be influenced easily

Findings

Discussing perception of gender roles participants highlighted their perspectives about representation of gender roles in Pakistani TV dramas. Major themes that emerged from the data were non stereotypic role of women and shallow presentation of men.

Non Stereotypic Role of Women

Almost all of the participants opined that mostly women are shown to be strong, resilient and career oriented. They are not shown as stereotypic to an extent as they used to be couple of years ago.

Careerism

Most of the participants believed that women now are more career oriented. They are shown to be qualified and on higher positions than men. Few participants were of the view that if she is shown to be successful she is associated with negative traits like egocentric, mischievous etc.

One of the participants said “Even if a woman is shown independent and strong she is shown in an indecent way. Ego, attitude and pride is associated with her if she seeks an independent life like in drama serial “Sabaat” the character of Miraal was shown to be powerful and authoritative but it was negative”. Participants were of the view that there are numerous dramas where women are shown to priorities her career over other things like domestic life and marriage. One of the participants added that “Dr Zubia from the drama serial “Yaqeen ka Safar” was an inspirational role. Such roles are source of motivation that even after your own family abandons you; one should not give up and should move on working hard to acquire a respectable career”.

Financial Stability

All of the participants from both socio economic statuses and of all age groups were of the view that the most important thing that women require to secure her future is financial stability and that’s what is shown in most of the TV Dramas these days. They believe that this is the era where survival is based on financial stability. All of the participants opined that marriage is no more the future of women. One of the participant added “marriage is just a part of life. It is not something our lives depend upon. Many dramas have shown that women can live happily ever after without marriage”. They believe this is rightly shown that firstly one should acquire financial independence and then opt for marriage. Mentioning the reason for this approach one of the participant said “it is only financial independence that can help one to get out of a toxic relation with husband otherwise women has no other choice

except for suffering the turmoil.” One of the participant mentioned “drama serial “Ghisi Piti Muhabbat” was a master piece. It made me feel so good that being divorced does not put you in pressure to get married until you get settled with a male counterpart. Life is more than a marriage and earning is equally important for both men and women.” Conversely there were few participants who perceived women to be shown as “Gold digger”. They were of the view that women is shown to go to any limits to attain the wealth. One of the participants added “women are shown as gold digger and a house wrecker too. I strongly believe that it is actually happening around us as stories shown in dramas are taken from our society, they are based on reality”. Participants believed that what is shown in TV drama is reflection of reality.

Women as Decision Makers

Most of the participants of the focus group highlighted the fact that dramas are showing women to be strong, empowered and financially independent conveying subtly that they are free to make their own decisions. One of the participants said “both the lead characters in drama serial “Sabaat” were shown as strong, educated and financially stable yet they were independent in taking decisions about their marital life. In both cases their families were also shown supportive.” Participants were of the view that women have always been shown to be suppressed and dominated by men’s decisions. They encouraged that such dramas need to be promoted in which women’s identity is accepted as an independent individual who can operate with her own will. One of the participants mentioned “*I admire the ending of Ghisi Piti Muhabbat where the lead character after confronting societal pressures took her own decision and she refused to marry and continued focusing her career in hoteling.*”

Non Stereotypic Role of Men

Most of the participants stressed on the fact that like women men are also shown beyond their stereotypic impression in Pakistani TV dramas.

Emotional Exploitation

All of the participants unanimously expressed that male roles are over shadowed by women roles. In most of the dramas women seem to be in strong roles whereas male seems to be weak and vulnerable. One of the participant said “*apparently the lead role of drama serial “Humsafar” Ashar earned popularity because of the looks and acting skills but to me he was weak as he was exploited so easily by his mother to abandon his pregnant wife.*” Similarly one of the participants added “*Males are shown more loyal as compare to females. They are made dumb in most dramas. In drama “Muhabbatain Chahtain” male lead role is shown so vague that he gets influenced by an intruder and spoils his marriage.*” Most of them believed although male roles are exaggerated yet we can learn from such roles that how males can be misled and what are the ways by which they can be convinced to do the wrongs.

Subject to Manipulation

All of the participants had the same opinion that it is hard to find men in strong role on TV these days. Most of the participants believed that men seem to have sublime roles on TV screens now. They can easily be manipulated and they fail to hold balance between the relationships they are connected with. One of the participants said “*Men are mostly shown in confused roles and having shaky personalities who cannot realize that they are being manipulated.*” It was also mentioned by another participant “*the lead role of drama serial Ghalati was shown to be an insane individual who was manipulated multiple times by his mother. I wonder how a man can be manipulated so easily to ruin his own home with his mere stupidity.*” Some of the participants said that male roles are shown to be unrealistic. Such roles do not exist in our society.

Loyal and Supportive

Some of the participants opined that although there are still aggressive and dominant male roles shown on TV but most of them are overshadowed with the more positive representation of male roles. One of the participant added “I wonder where we can find man like Danish from blockbuster drama serial “*Meray Pass Tum Hu*” in real life. *Practically such man does not exist in our society. A man loyal to a limit that he would let go his characterless wife is beyond natural.*”

Discussion

In comparison with previous studies, findings of this research paper highlight altogether different perspective of viewers about representation of gender roles. Pakistani TV industry had been developing for last two decades. There had been variations in the content of television dramas. From most conventional stories to most innovative ones are given space on television. The data collected indicated that there had been change in the presentation of gender roles in Pakistani TV dramas so is the perception of females from both socio economic statuses. There had been long debate on how TV contributes in reinforcing stereotypic gender roles (Gow, 1996). This research paper indicated that most female viewers are of the view that female roles are represented more of strong and independent. They occupy more space and have relatively increased in number (Emons, Wester, & Scheepers, 2010). Most participants believed that this tendency of TV dramas is encouraging for the women who have been struggling to normalize the culture of working women and financial independency of women. This is the need of the time as financial independence helps women to get into a position where they can take their decisions. Moreover all of the participants talked about image of women as “gold digger” and agreed that such characters do exist and it is not the case that TV drama is setting new role for women rather it is reflecting what occurs in reality. About male roles all participants opined that they are shown to be weaker and vulnerable. The reason they believe is that mostly the audience for dramas are females so they tend to focus on female roles as compare to males. Most participants expressed that they tend to see male in roles neither dominating nor submissive but in roles protecting women. Most dramas portray male roles that can be manipulated and exploited by women against women or are too submissive and indecisive that they appear to be exaggerated and unnatural. There had been studies on women representation in Pakistani TV dramas. Most of them concluded that there is a shift from most stereotypic representation to non-stereotypic representation of gender roles. It was also concluded that 3 out of 4 female lead roles are depicted as strong, educated and empowered who know her rights and is ready to fight for them (Roy, 2016; Jiwani, 2013; Khan & Zaheen, 2010). The results obtained from this study are also in line with emerging studies that also ascertain change in representation of gender roles.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that female viewers who are fond of watching TV dramas exhibit conformity with reconstruction of gender roles. They are strongly influenced by the roles that TV drama set for them and are vocal enough to express their dissatisfaction for the representation of male roles. This research paper explores that how representation of gender roles contribute in setting models for its viewers. On the basis of perceptions of female viewers it is examined that gender roles are no more stereotypic in Pakistani TV drama. Female viewers perceive them exactly the way they are represented. Women of both socioeconomic statuses firmly believed that women now shown in Pakistani Television drama are empowered, independent and strong.

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