

FROM COLONIAL TROPES TO CONTEMPORARY SCREENS: EVOLUTION OF THE SUBMISSIVE PAKISTANI WOMAN IN MEDIA NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This research investigates the enduring representation of Pakistani women as submissive characters in media, and follows the development of these depictions from colonial discourses to the present-day television dramas and films. Employing secondary data analysis, the study critically analyzes how strong gender ideologies still influence the representation of women characters within popular culture. The research points to ways in which colonial patriarchy and religious conservatism-inspired narratives have been transformed and replicated through contemporary media, in turn reifying traditional gender constructs and obscuring empowered feminine identity. Examples from popular dramas like *Humsafar*, *Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan*, and *Pyar Ke Sadqay* show how these representations naturalize the silence, sacrifice, and submission of women even within purportedly progressive narratives. The conclusions are that Pakistani media operates both as a representation and a reinforcement of patriarchal systems, and that a conscious shift in narrative practices is needed to combat such restrictive representations. The study concludes with recommendations for more representative and empowered media representations of women, highlighting the media's potential as an instrument of social transformation.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in Pakistani media has for a long time been influenced by deeply rooted cultural, historical, and ideological factors. Central to and recurring in these representations is the creation of the "submissive woman" – a subject often characterized by silence, obedience, and moral uprightness in the home. This figure did not develop in a vacuum, however, but developed from colonial-era narratives that essentialized and romanticized the Eastern woman as passively oppressed and in need of Western civilization (Mohanty, 1988; Loomba, 2005). British colonial officials and missionaries

often characterizes South Asian women as being constrained by religion and tradition, when compared to the "liberated" Western woman. These tropes were used not only to legitimize colonial rule but also to repress indigenous reformist and feminist discourses (Spivak, 1988; Chatterjee, 1989).

After independence, Pakistan inherited not only the colonial state's institutional order, but also much of its imaginaries of gender. These colonial inheritances, in combination with the patriarchal orders traced through feudal, religious, and tribal traditions, have shaped women's representation in

mass media profoundly (Zia, 2009). Television dramas and cinema – popular media forms in Pakistan – became strong weapons by which visions of femininity were spread. Women were invariably presented as obedient wives, self-sacrificing mothers, or devout daughters whose worth was usually measured by how well they could serve others, be emotionally controlled, and maintain family honor (Ali & Batool, 2015). Women being presented as submissive is still normalized in mainstream media, perpetuating cultural norms of gender roles and excluding a presentation of women's varied everyday lives.

With growing feminist activism in Pakistan – notably the arrival of the Aurat March – and the increased public presence of women, there has been an accompanying tension in how women are represented. As some recent media narratives strive to show more aggressive or multifaceted female protagonists, many are still attached to older stereotypes that tacitly penalize agency and reward submission (Khan & Ahmad, 2021). This duality is representative of the larger societal struggle between tradition and modernity, and patriarchal values versus feminist critique. Further, not only does media reflect culture, but it also constructs it – shaping opinion and consolidating hegemonic ideologies (Hall, 1997). Therefore, an analysis of women's representation in decades of Pakistani media is crucial to understanding how colonial tropes have been perpetuated, reimagined, or subverted in the post-colonial era.

It uses secondary data analysis to track the history of submissive female representations in Pakistani media, from colonial influences through to postcolonial screen narratives. Through an examination of scholarly literature, media archives, and feminist critiques, it attempts to deconstruct the long-lasting relevance of colonial representation and its entanglement with local patriarchal power structures. With this in mind, the study questions not only what appears on screen but also what these representations indicate about the social values, resistances, and anxieties regarding gender roles in Pakistan in the present day.

Research questions:

How did colonial narratives construct the image of South Asian women, particularly as submissive beings, and what elements of these tropes can be traced in Pakistani media after independence?

In what ways have Pakistani films, television dramas, and advertisements from the 1950s to the present perpetuated, modified, or challenged the stereotype of the submissive Pakistani woman?

How do shifts in sociopolitical contexts, such as the Islamization period of the 1980s or recent feminist movements like Aurat March, reflect in the changing media portrayals of women's agency and submission? What role has Pakistani media played in sustaining or transforming colonial-era gendered stereotypes, and how do these portrayals affect societal perceptions of women's roles today?

Research Objectives:

- To examine the origins of submissive female tropes in colonial narratives about South Asian women and identify their influence on post-colonial Pakistani media.
- To analyze the evolution of the portrayal of Pakistani women in films, television dramas, and advertisements from the 1950s to the present.
- To assess the impact of key sociopolitical shifts – including Islamization policies and feminist movements – on the representation of women's agency and submission in Pakistani media.
- To evaluate how contemporary Pakistani media sustains, modifies, or challenges colonial-era stereotypes of submissive women, and to explore the implications for societal attitudes towards women's roles today.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research will employ qualitative, secondary data analysis to explore how representations of Pakistani women as submissive have changed over media narratives from the colonial era to the contemporary era. Secondary data will comprise available scholarly literature, historical documents, media databases, and reports by reputable organizations.

Data Collection**Secondary Sources:**

Historical Documents: Scholarly articles and books analyzing colonial representations of South Asian women.

Media Studies: Research articles, dissertations, and reports on Pakistani film, television, advertising, and news coverage of women from independence to the present.

NGO/Policy Reports: Gender-focused reports from organizations like UN Women, Aurat Foundation, and Human Rights Watch addressing gender stereotypes in Pakistani media.

Archival Compilations: Digitized collections of advertisements, film scripts, or television scripts included in existing academic works or curated archives.

Media Content Analyses: Existing empirical studies analyzing depictions of Pakistani women in drama, news, and social media.

Sampling Strategy:

Purposive Sampling of Literature: Focus on key studies spanning different time periods: colonial/pre-partition, early post-independence, Zia era (1977–1988), and contemporary post-2000s media.

Inclusion Criteria: Studies discussing themes like submissiveness, domesticity, honor, and women's roles in Pakistani society.

Data Analysis**Literature Review-Based Analysis:**

Systematically review and synthesize findings from existing research on the portrayal of Pakistani women.

Extract and categorize dominant themes, patterns, and shifts in narratives across time periods.

Comparative Temporal Analysis:

Compare findings on colonial, early post-independence, and contemporary depictions to trace continuities or ruptures in submissive portrayals.

Thematic Synthesis:

Organize data around themes such as idealized femininity, patriarchal control, resistance, and the intersection of religion and culture in shaping submissive images.

Theoretical Framework:

This study is informed by Postcolonial Feminist Theory, which offers a critical framework with which to examine how colonial ideologies erected South Asian women as passive and submissive stereotypes, and how these stereotypes were internalized or subverted within Pakistani media over time. Postcolonial feminism emphasizes the convergence of gender, culture, and colonial power and how indigenous women were represented in British colonial discourses as icons of backwardness or exotic docility to legitimize imperial control. These colonial discourses did not disappear with independence but continued to shape national concepts of femininity and respectability, which were reinforced subsequently through Pakistani media depictions. This view is complemented by Feminist Media Studies providing means to deconstruct the way contemporary Pakistani cinema, tele-dramas, and advertisements have represented women in terms of how these inherited stereotypes are reproduced, negotiated, or subverted. This framework enables close attention to the way patriarchal and colonial legacies interact in the representation of Pakistani women, enabling both the tracing of historical continuities and change in media narratives on the representation of femininity, agency, and submission.

Validity and Reliability:

In order to authenticate this research, the study will employ a broad selection of reputable secondary sources, such as academic journals, historical publications, reports by non-governmental organizations, and media analyses, for source triangulation in order to compare and validate findings between different viewpoints and periods. The study will rely on an assortment of sources in order to provide a dynamic and multifaceted representation of how the representation of Pakistani women has changed. Reliability will be improved by

documenting the selection criteria for all included sources in a transparent and methodical fashion, with reasons clearly stated for why specific studies, time periods, and material were selected. This raises the replicability of the study as future researchers can use the same criteria to check or expand on the analysis. Moreover, persistent thematic coding of evidence derived from secondary sources will ensure consistency in interpretation, adding further to the reliability of the research findings.

Limitations of the Research:

The study relies wholly on secondary data analysis, and as such, has inherent limitations. In the first instance, the research is predicated on existing literature, media archives, and scholarly criticism, and thus may be subject to biases, assumptions, or methodological failings of their original authors. Because the data is interpretive and historical, it cannot record first-hand accounts of media producers, scriptwriters, or present-day audiences who read these stories differently. The lack of primary data, i.e., interviews or surveys, puts a limit on how much is known about the ways in which contemporary viewers negotiate or resist compliant images of women. Besides, the analysis is limited by the presence and accessibility of recorded media material; less popular or older dramas and movies may not be preserved online or in databases, leaving gaps for historical coverage. Finally, since the media in Pakistan changes over time, the findings of the study are a snapshot and not a complete or predictive assessment of future trends.

Significance of the Research:

In spite of its shortcomings, this research is of important scholarly and social merit. By charting the historical development of the subservient female archetype within Pakistani media, this research adds to our understanding of how colonial-era tropes continue to inform modern-day gender norms within post-colonial societies. It bridges feminist scholarship, media studies, and postcolonial studies, pointing out the nexus of transnational power relations and indigenous patriarchies in the construction of images of Pakistani womanhood. The study is also a valuable reference point for

activists, teachers, and policy-makers who aim to counter regressive stereotypes and foster more empowering and representative portrayals of women in the media. At a time when movements such as the Aurat March are agitating for change, this analysis makes it clear that media narratives play a critical role in reinforcing or dismantling gendered inequalities. Finally, by historicizing and resisting these representations, the research invites conversation about how cultural production can break free from inherited stereotypes and advance more just social imaginaries.

Literature review:

The subaltern representation of South Asian women in the media is long standing and can be traced to the colonial discourse where native women were represented as wild seductive creatures or hapless victims, thus serving as colonial justifications for the occupation (Spivak, 1988). British officials and missionaries constructed native women as helpless and dependent, and the colonizers as the saviors (Mohanty, 1988). These stereotypes leaked into early Urdu literature, cinema and fashion, to create an environment of the culture where passiveness came to be the omnipresent narrative of a woman. Independent Pakistani media after Partition also inherited these colonial tropes and uncritically reproduced character of women with shows like the iconic PTV dramas *Khuda Ki Basti* (1974) and *Waris* (1979) which portrayed women as long-suffering, patient, and confined to the private with endurance being valorized as a female virtue (Jamal, 2016).

In the 1980s and 1990s, PTV serials such as *Dhoop Kinare* and *Tanhaiyan*, too, re-enforced notions of motherhood as synonymous with a certain kind of sainthood; objectives that linked bearability to silence, sacrifice, and a turn of the female body or mind to family. Character such as Dr. Zoya (*Dhoop Kinare*) may look professional but in the end are redeemed for choosing relationships over personal aspirations. In the same way, *Ankahi* (1982) and *Parchaiyan* (1976) illustrate females, stuck up in between mild assertion and the need to maintain submissive behavior for self-respect and stability, implicitly accessed through the idea that females

should compromise for familial peace (Shah & Ahmed, 2019).

This wave carried on through the 2000s and 2010s, with blockbusting serials such as *Humsafar* (2011) and *Meri Zaat Zarra-e-Benishan* (2009), in which heroines like Khirad and Saba came to epitomise patience and quiet suffering in the face of cruelty and betrayal. Such dramas achieved widespread success and solidified the “mazloom aurat” (a woman oppressed) character in contemporary TV plays, which went on to influence cultural representations of the ideal feminine form as one that is martyred and suffering (Zia, 2017). Even the most recent hits including *Khaani* (2017) and *Mere Paas Tum Ho* (2019) focus women centred stories concerning criminalization or enslavement of women secondary to male assault and betrayal rather than the protagonists of their own stories (Iqbal & Pasha, 2022).

Feminist media researchers assert that representations such as these normalize passivity and reward submissiveness and present active resistance as dangerous or immoral (Bandura, 2001; Ahmad & Mukhtar, 2023). This is echoed in cultivation theory, which suggests that the long-term exposure to such narratives normalises and affirms patriarchal gender values among audiences (e.g. Gerbner et al. Furthermore, narratives in some dramas, such as *Chupke Chupke* (2021) or *Mohabbat Tumse Nafrat Hai* (2017), legitimise the act of submission by interpreting it as a part of culture and religion; which in turn cements the belief of the women being naturally subservient (Hadi, 2017).

Studies show these media memes have real-world effects. Naseem et al. (2020) revealed such associations between high exposure to submissive female representation and accommodation to traditional gender roles in Pakistani homes. Zia (2017) and Cheema and Jamal (2022) point out that commercial interests and anxieties over conservative backslashing tend to dissuade mainstream media from showing any positive, independent female leads, further reinforcing stereotypes, even as social practices change. Censorship even further restricts other forms of representation as well, thanks to regulatory trusts like PEMRA, which demand

content censure that is deemed “anti-‘culture or religion’” (Hassan & Daniyal, 2022).

Postcolonial feminist theory reminds us that these stories are not coincidental, that they are reflections of power dynamics that have been produced by colonial histories. According to Mohanty (1988), representations of women of the Third World as passive contribute to global structures from which both patriarchy and neocolonialist thought continues to benefit. This lens shows how Pakistani media’s subjugated narratives on women used in historical continuity carry colonial history of constructing the native womanhood, that continues through cultural production to discipline the gender roles (Spivak, 1988).

Although some resistance can be seen in isolated instances—for example *Udaari* (2016) and *Sammi* (2017) address issues of child abuse and honour killings, respectively—CSs at large tend to treat female agency as exceptional rather than normal, therefore (re)enforcing ‘a submission chassis as the default stakes’ (Ahmad & Mukhtar, 2023). In addition to it, plays such as *Dil Lagi* (2016) seem to challenge conventional gender codes with powerful female protagonists, but ultimately have the heroine reembrace patriarchal values at the end, thus rendering the resistance to the normative null (Hassan & Daniyal, 2022).

Jeet is another case of being exposed to new models of femininity courtesy of global influences through Turkish series like *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* or Korean dramas streaming on Netflix. But the changes have also been restricted by cultural specificity, niche audiences and the dominance of subjugated female archetypes on local television that still hold sway (Iqbal & Pasha, 2022). New media in Pakistan, such as YouTube web series or short films, sometimes present a greater variety of female characters, but their reach and influence is significantly less than that of television drama (Syed et al., 2019).

Apart from the conventional depiction of passive women in series dramas, recent studies have shown how media re-inscribes gendered inequalities through structural and ideological dimensions. The authors also note that “television is one of the most powerful tools of propaganda and the Pakistani drama industry is no exception” (Zubair & Zubair

(2021), p.257) where “most of the TV content, which is being produced, constructs ideal femininity with themes of submission, silence, tolerance, and endurance in accordance with the patriarchal ideologies of women” (p.257). In a study of 15 prime-time dramas over two years, they concluded that female leads tended to be placed in positions of dependence, often relying on men to resolve conflict or approve of one’s responses. Reinforcement of Stereotypes Khalid and Ali (2019) also observe that scripts perpetuate stereotypes as, “..the language is reflective of stereotypes with terms such as shareef, sabar, sharmeeli (pious, patient, shy) being lauded and assertiveness being negatively coded” (2019). This language framing feeds into a cultural story that we tell about women: that their worth is measured by their capacity to withstand rather than eradicate injustice.

Add to this the representation of women in morning and infotainment shows, which just reinforces these stereotypes. Aslam and Syed (2020) observe that female anchors and guests in these programmes frequently support messages that underlie the importance of domesticity, marriage, beauty and compliance in a woman’s definition. (Think cooking demonstrations, couples therapy sessions and child-rearing lectures – all kinds of domesticity and emotional labor that > 1 It’s not that emotional labor and setting up the home are the property of women, but that popular discourse often positions them as feminine. Even when they address social issues, though, they hardly subvert the norms they tacitly embrace. This is consistent with findings also presented in Gardezi and Zehra (2022), where media organizations focus on audience ratings and advertiser’s perspective than to provide an effective voice to progressive discourse, leading to an adverse feedback loop in content production resisting feminist narratives and sidelining reasonably assertive woman viewpoints.

Significantly, the digital media has brought about counter-narratives, yet these are sporadic and under-resourced. Independent platforms including Aur Digital and creators on YouTube and Instagram have brought out web series and short films with female leads who question the patriarchal diktats. For instance, in shows such as Churails (2020) female

characters of a wide variety of backgrounds, purposes and potentialities militate against exploitation. Critically acclaimed Churails was banned for a short period of time in Pakistan due to institutional unease towards such daring narratives (Latif 2021). Haider and Hussain (2023) contend that the struggle between traditional and enlightened representations is representative of a mediascape pulled between the modern and the traditional. Although the advent of feminist hashtags and campaigns like #MeraJismMeriMarzi indicates a change in the mindset among younger generations, mainstream media remains loath to accept stories that completely overturn submissive stereotypes.

Finally, rather than being cultural ‘baggage’ the submissive category of Pakistani women enshrined in the media serves to demonstrate not simply the colonial frame but the extent of local history through its entanglement in colonial stereotyping that is kept alive through economic, religious and political pressures. This study seeks to contribute to these issues by providing a comprehensive and historically informed analysis linking these long-standing representations to the colonial project and investigating its role in reproducing gender difference. It seeks to contribute toward an investment in both current, and future, diversified, empowered representations of Pakistani women through a critical discussion of the trajectory of these narratives.

Finding and discussion:

Examination of secondary data from seminal academic research, media content analyses, and historical sources, indicates a consistent, systemic construction of Pakistani women as passive, long-suffering, self-sacrificing, throughout several decades of popular media. The results demonstrate that even with social modernization and greater exposure to women’s rights, mainstream dramas, entertainment, and television dramas still rehash colonial images of the submissive, helpless woman. From the 1970s (Khuda Ki Basti) to recent blockbusters (Mere Paas Tum Ho and Khaani) there’s a constant reminder that saving woman’s honor demands silence or suffering as a moral obligation, an act perpetuating

appreciative nod to the submissive woman as an admirable and necessary quality of womanhood.

Furthermore, a linguistic analysis of scripts in the studies by Khalid and Ali (2019) and Zubair and Zubair (2021) illustrates the predominance of gendered language that promotes patience (sabar), modesty (haya) and obedience (farmabardari). Words like these are common, and frequently we tend to see them as positive labels, while words deemed assertive – or independent are cast as negative. This not only reproduces submissiveness, but also enculturates an audience to consider resistance or independence incompatible with cultural ideals of womanhood.

Significant reinforcement of such gender norms are also identified in the stories via religious and moral justifications. In dramas like Mohabbat Tumse Nafarat Hai, characters enjoin a specific religion to force female characters into covenanting forgiveness and silence – this is a display of how specific religious tenets are mobilised to legitimate submissive roles. This is consistent with Hadi (2017) who contends that religion is often utilized in media as a tool to brainwash women into adhering to patriarchal values.

Recent studies have revealed a tension between established and emergent images. While innovative digital series such as Churails and Qatil Haseenaon Ke Naam in Pakistan serve as strong counter-narratives of empowered women who fight the odds, and are equally challenged and condemned—banned or called for censorship—suggest that mainstreaming of empowered women narratives continues to be limited. Research by Haider and Hussein (2023) along with Latif (2021) demonstrate that empowered femininity continues to be constructed in popular media as deviant or rebellious and characterisations of assertive women are either represented as villainous or strategically placed outside of society's moral landscape.

The analysis of these findings shows that the journey of the submissive woman image in Pakistani media has not taken a turning but more or less established an adjustment. Colonial images of the vulnerable, helpless native woman have been localised and preserved to benefit the patriarchal elites in the garb of tradition, culture and morality. While resistant tellings are structurally present, these are

interpellated not as a subversive response but as an exception or departure. This is in line with Bandura (2001) who theorizes in his Social cognitive theory that with repeated exposure to submissive roles embedded in the media; such portrayals are adopted and accepted in the society that such media.

These results further validate Gerbner's cultivation theory, as how women are portrayed in the real world is reflected and reinforced by viewers of typical dramas. The unwillingness of the main media producers to stray from the narrative submissive figure can be ascribed in equal parts to commercial considerations – where, because conservative audience alienation is feared – as to formal criteria, such as guidelines dictated by PEMRA, discouraging content which is seen as culturally untoward, or as disturbing established gender hierarchies (Hassan & Daniyal, 2022).

Viewed together, these findings reflect a contradictory yet coherent picture: while international and local calls for gender equality are widespread, Pakistani media narratives remain steadfastly committed to the cultivation of a submissive vision of womanhood. Such representations are not merely reminders of colonial values, but also mechanisms that sustain patriarchal power in the present. Unless the stories of ordinary women become a force in mainstream media and not just “stories” restricted to women's sections, and unless the women's movement succeeds in pushing for a transformation of narratives in media and society at large, and attempts to subvert deeply rooted stereotypes, the advances toward real gender equality will be slow and fought at every step.

Conclusion

We argue that this research shows, the stereotype of the Pakistani woman is still very much based on colonial beliefs in the media in Pakistan serving to reinforce the overarching patriarchal ideal of the submissive Pakistani woman. The Middle- Eastern country of Pakistan has transitioned and liberalized into the modern world with the advancements that both technology and time bring, however, the country's cultural representation of women however, still reflects a back dated society. The characters who are 'women' are always being patient, always being

obedient, and always sacrificing themselves, without any form of resistance and any form of individuality, let alone any other kind of rebel or social sinner. Even when they make more recent efforts to portray empowered female characters, as in *Churails*, they cannot escape institutional resistance and popular backlashes that would cause the perennial discomfort with the disruptions of traditional gender hierarchies to bubble up. The implications of these findings are that popular media in Pakistan functions as a mirror and a mold: it mirrors patriarchal cultural ideals and simultaneously molds societal expectations by presenting submissive femininity as normative.

Recommendations

To knock this cycle of pop culture perceptions of weak women off its axis, media gatekeepers (writers, showrunners, directors, regulators) need to actively strive for diversity in female representation and narratives. They could start by making script writers strive to do much more than fall back on tired archetypes of patient wives and sacrificial mothers in order to shape complex female characters who exercise agency, possess intelligence, and show resilience without incurring a price. Second, production houses and broadcasting companies must invest in and encourage narratives that challenge patriarchal norms, creating room for stories about women in leadership, entrepreneurship, activism, and other empowered positions. Third, governments and governing bodies such as PEMRA should review archaic censorship laws which only aid in withholding the portrayal of women as they strive to be present; acknowledging the part media plays in achieving gender equality.

Furthermore, Media literacy campaigns across audiences need to emphasize critical reflection on and engagement with media content to identify and challenge gendered stereotypes, rather than consuming and accepting gendered media messages. Civil society groups have an important role to play too in the development of partnerships with content creators to foster gender equitable representations. We would encourage future research to consider studies that examine how media narratives change across time as well as how audiences interpret gendered representations and whether or not digital

media spaces may challenge and resist dominant constructions.

These suggestions, which address both the production and the reception of media, could help to deconstruct the lingering stereotype of the passive Pakistani woman, and lay the foundation for a media landscape that is less Unruly, a landscape that speaks not only to the women of the nation but also the myriad ways in which Pakistani society has changed in recent years.

Ethical Considerations

This study utilizes only publicly available and published secondary data, so the ethical risks are low. Interpretations will continue to be sensitive to cultural sensibilities, and unwilling to generalize or essentialize women of Pakistan.

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