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## Beyond The Screen: Impact of Pakistani Television Dramas on Women's Marital Life in Tehsil Mardan

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### Abstract

This study explores the role of Pakistani TV dramas in women's marriages. The research employs a qualitative approach. Data were collected using purposive sampling from married female students of the Government Postgraduate College Mardan and the Government Postgraduate College for Women Mardan. A purposive sample of 14 women was selected, and the sample size was determined using the data saturation approach, where data were collected until no new information could be gained. Data were collected through interviews, which allowed them to share their thoughts and experiences. Data collection was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. This resulted in seven major themes: unrealistic expectations, high-class culture, mate selection, spousal conflicts and divorce, women's independence, trivialisation of marriage and changing gender roles. The findings indicate that Pakistani TV dramas glamorise love marriages, dramatize spousal disputes and trivialise divorce, which in turn results in unrealistic expectations. The gap between media and reality might result in marital dissatisfaction, mistrust and disputes, and indirectly contribute to a high divorce rate. The research reveals that Pakistani television dramas are a powerful socialising tool; more real-life images of marriage are needed. It is indicated that the patient, respectful, communicative, emphatic, and family togetherness should be emphasized in dramas. This moral depiction may assist the viewers in gaining a clearer insight into marriage and in making society a better place.

**Keywords:** Pakistani Television Dramas, Marriage, Attitude of Women, Divorce, Content Analysis.

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## **Introduction**

Television has a strong influence on social, cultural and individual attitudes. It is a major socialising agent that aids in shaping social attitudes and behaviour. TV dramas have been an important part of Pakistan since the establishment of Pakistan Television (PTV) in 1964. During the initial years, PTV attempted to maintain the moral and cultural values and educational materials that were nationalistic in nature. However, the introduction of the Pakistani viewer to a mixture of modern and globalised content with the appearance of the Pakistani television channels in the early 2000s caused cultural and social changes (Hussain, 2012). Pakistani TV drama has turned out to be the most popular entertainment and informal education, especially for women. Such dramas frequently depict family dynamics, gender relations, marriages and thus have an impact on the views and expectations of viewers. The available literature shows that television dramas are more likely to perpetuate gender stereotypes by portraying women as housewives, as well as introducing new concepts that can disrupt cultural norms (Ashfaq et al., 2018).

This ambivalent image confuses and distorts the views of viewers, particularly young women, about their status as wives and mothers. Marriage is a social institution and it is a product of cultural, psychological and socioeconomic factors and encompasses aspects of attachment, roles and conflict management (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Pakistani dramas tend to romanticise marriage by glorifying love marriages, dramatising marriage-related problems and in a few cases, justifying divorce as a way of solving marital problems. As much as such a depiction can be positive in terms of increasing awareness of women's empowerment and rights, it can also lead to unrealistic expectations that do not match real-life experiences, leading to marital dissatisfaction and conflicts. The last few years in Pakistan have seen a tremendous rise in divorce rates and this is an indicator of changing trends in marriage. While several social, economic, and cultural factors are responsible for this, the media, especially television dramas, may indirectly influence attitudes towards marriage and divorce. The easy accessibility and popularity of television in both urban and rural areas (Gallup Pakistan, 2014) indicate its potential impact on societal attitudes. Although the media is becoming more influential, there is a lack of studies exploring the impact of Pakistani television dramas on women's marital lives at the grassroots level. So, this research seeks to investigate the influence of Pakistani television dramas on the marriage of women in Tehsil Mardan, by examining their views of relationships, expectations from marriage, and views of divorce. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to a greater understanding of the influence of media on society and the importance of more realistic representations of marriage in television dramas.

## **Literature Review**

The media is a significant influence on public opinion, social values and norms, and a strong socialising force in modern society. Television is a prominent medium of informal education, which shapes people's viewpoints and behaviours in everyday life (Baran, 2004). Pakistani television dramas are a popular form of entertainment, especially among women, and reflect the social fabric of our society by depicting family dynamics, relationships, and social problems. The history of Pakistani television dramas is reflective of social and technological changes. The dramas of the past, particularly during the Pakistan Television (PTV) era, primarily focused on issues related to morality, culture, and social consciousness. They aimed to enlighten and educate the masses, as well as to propagate national values and morals. However, with the advent of the privatized media organizations and technological advances, the content of the Pakistani dramas has also diversified. The dramas today are more involving themes of modernity, urbanity and

globalisation, which have influenced the feelings and perceptions of the audiences, particularly the youthful generation (Hussain, 2012).

The presentation of female characters in TV dramas was one of the main concerns of the writing. It has been found out that women are often represented in traditional domestic roles and it has reinforced the conventional gender roles and the independent and working women are at times shown in a negative light. (Ashfaq et al., 2018). On the other hand, recent drama shows have also started to portray women's empowerment, education, domestic violence, and class inequality. This combination of representations presents a complex and contradictory representation, which may confuse viewers, particularly women, about their roles, responsibilities, and identities in marriage and society. TV dramas are also significant in influencing attitudes to family and relationships. The dramas in Pakistan are usually centered around family and marital discord, conflict, emotional tensions and power struggles in the family. These have a tendency to portray dysfunctional families, which may affect the attitude of people towards marriage and family. This can cause some transformations in the family structure, like the transition between joint and nuclear families (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990). Also, the increased emphasis on violence and tension can be an unrealistic ideal of marriage, which can cause dissatisfaction in the relationship in real life. In addition to family and marriage attitudes, self-perception and behaviour are also influenced by television dramas. Television dramas may also cause viewers and in this case, women, to emulate the dressing, accent and attitude of the show, a factor which underscores the strong influence of the media in identity formation. In addition, frequent exposure to violence, aggression, and distress on television may cause adverse psychological impacts, including increased anxiety and social indifference (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006).

Theoretically, cultivation theory provides knowledge on the impact of television on the viewers. According to Gerbner et al. (1986), the long-term exposure to television material may distort the social reality in the minds of viewers, forming a worldview that aligns with media images. In Pakistan, it implies that the expectations and perceptions of marriage of people can be influenced by the dramatized portrayals of marriage, conflict and divorce in dramas. In addition, TV dramas significantly affect the values and norms of marriage. They idealize love, sensationalize problems and even idealize divorce as a solution to relationship problems. Although these narratives can help viewers become aware of women's rights and other social issues, they can also confuse viewers about what constitutes a healthy relationship by underrepresenting the values of patience, compromise and respect. This, in turn, can lead to unrealistic expectations of marriage, which could have detrimental effects on viewers' relationships.

In sum, the research indicates that while Pakistani television dramas have a positive impact on society, they also have a negative impact. They provide a forum for the discussion of important social issues, such as gender equality and women's rights. On the other hand, they also play a role in perpetuating stereotypes, false expectations, and evolving family structures. While there is an increasing body of research on the effects of media, little is known about the role of Pakistani television dramas in influencing women's married lives, in particular, their relationship expectations and perceptions of divorce. Thus, this research will attempt to bridge this gap by offering a qualitative analysis of women's experiences in Tehsil Mardan.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study was carried out in Tehsil Mardan, the universe of the study. The study employs a qualitative approach to explore the impact of Pakistani television dramas on women's marriages. Qualitative research is well-suited for studying complex social issues and eliciting the participants'

experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. The target population of the study is married female students of the Government Postgraduate College Mardan and the Government Postgraduate College for Women Mardan who are avid viewers of Pakistani television dramas. Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who fit certain criteria that were relevant to the study. This form of non-probability sampling enabled the researchers to target those who have the relevant experience and knowledge of the phenomenon of interest. A total of 14 participants were recruited, and data collection stopped once saturation was reached (i.e., when no further insights were gained from the data) (Kotler & Keller, 2016). The method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. This approach ensured uniformity among participants, while also allowing for a deeper exploration of participants' opinions (Bryman, 2016). The interviews were carried out in a culturally sensitive manner so that the participants could feel comfortable and express themselves freely. The data were thematically analyzed and transcribed. The process used in this method is the coding, sorting and recognizing the motifs and trends within the data, giving the researchers the ability to make inferences and conclusions based on the objectives of the study. The inclusion criteria included married women who are residents of Tehsil Mardan and watch Pakistani Urdu dramas. The study did not include marriage, television drama watchers, or residents of Tehsil Mardan. This served to maintain the focus of the sample population on the research questions. There are limitations in the study. First, the findings are local, which might not be generalized elsewhere. Second, there might be a social desirability bias due to the use of self-reported information. Third, there is a dynamic nature of the television content, which can shorten the findings' durability. Good moral practices were put into thorough consideration. Informed consent was given to the participants before interviews. The protection of anonymity and confidentiality was achieved by not revealing the identities of the participants and making use of the information strictly for academic goals. Measures were implemented to prevent psychological distress in interviews. Furthermore, female interviewers were employed because they were necessary to follow cultural traditions and make the participants feel comfortable and at ease in the process of interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

**Table-1:** *Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 14)*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Age</b>	18–22 years	4	28.6%
	23–27 years	6	42.9%
	28–32 years	4	28.4%
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married	14	100%
<b>Education Level</b>	Undergraduate	5	35.7%
	Graduate	6	42.9%
	Postgraduate	3	21.4%
<b>Institution</b>	GPGC Mardan	7	50%

	GPGCW Mardan	7	50%
<b>Viewership of TV Dramas</b>	Regular viewers	14	100%
<b>Residence</b>	Tehsil Mardan (Urban)	6	42.9%
	Tehsil Mardan (Rural)	8	57.1%

### **Description of Demographic Profile**

The demographic profile of the respondents indicates that the study has a sample of 14 married females' avid viewers of Pakistani dramas. The majority of the respondents were in the age groups of 23-27 years (42.9%), 18-22 years (28.6%) and 28-32 years (28.4%). This suggests that most of the respondents were young adults, a life stage where the media may have a strong influence on attitudes towards marriage. The respondents were all married women (100%) in line with the study's objective on married life. With respect to the educational status of the participants, the majority were graduates (42.9%), followed by undergraduates (35.7%) and postgraduates (21.4%), implying a mid-level educated sample. The sample was equally represented from the Government Postgraduate College Mardan and the Government Postgraduate College for Women Mardan (50% each). All respondents were regular viewers of Pakistan television dramas and hence relevant to the study. As regards the status of the respondents, 57.1% of the respondents belonged to rural areas of Tehsil Mardan and 42.9% belonged to urban areas, which is nearly equal in both groups. This helped to make the study have a wide perspective of the effects of Pakistani television dramas on perceptions of marriage in different social and residential situations.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Qualitative research is a research that aims at knowing what people experience, what they believe in and their social setups. It incorporates the collection of information in non-numerical form, i.e., interview and observation, in order to know more about a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The technique is especially useful in studies where the goal is to understand intricate social processes, as well as human behavior in its natural setting. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that is often used to analyse and interpret patterns (data themes) in qualitative data. It helps researchers sort and describe data in a meaningful manner and identify key concepts pertinent to the research question(s) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves coding and theme generation to understand the participants' viewpoints and to draw inferences from the data. The below given themes were emerged from the data.

### **Unrealistic Expectations**

A major theme was the setting of unrealistic expectations through TV dramas in Pakistan. These dramas present women who are patient and endure hardship and sacrifice as a virtue. For example, characters are depicted enduring emotional and physical violence, and being rewarded for this identity of patience and silence as the ideal for women. Participants highlighted that:

*Depictions in Pakistani dramas tend to promote passivity among women and the tolerance of injustice in response to emotional, social, or domestic conflicts, which has the potential to affect how women respond to such conflicts in their own lives. Moreover, dramas often present unrealistic social narratives, such as inter-class marriages without considering the barriers,*

*challenges, and emotional dilemmas that may arise. Such idealistic representations can misdirect viewer perceptions of marriages and social arrangements, which may lead to unrealistic expectations, disappointment, and tension in marriages. In some instances, watching these dramas may also reinforce the idea that emotional pain is an essential element of marriage and foster an atmosphere of discouragement and avoidance of communication and problem-solving in real marriages.*

### **High-Class Culture**

A second major theme was the depiction of high-class culture. Pakistani dramas depict opulent lifestyles, contemporary fashion, and Westernised culture. Participants indicated that:

*These representations create a disconnect between dramas and the lives of middle- and lower-class families. Although some participants acknowledged that dramas play a positive role in raising issues such as women's empowerment and education, most pointed out that dramas focus on upper-class lifestyles and promote unrealistic expectations. This can cause viewers to compare their lives with the drama, which leads to unhappiness and a misconception of reality.*

### **Mate Selection**

Dramas often present an idealised and romantic view of mate selection. Respondents indicated that dramas usually portray short-term relationships that rapidly develop into marriage with little family intervention and social barriers. However, marriage practices in Pakistan involve family approval, cultural and social compatibility. In addition, respondents expressed concerns that:

*Television and media representations have a profound influence on young people's attitudes towards relationships and marriage. This can lead some young people to engage in impulsive acts, such as court marriages and elopement, without taking into account social, family, and other factors. Such impulsive choices, inspired by sensationalist media representations, may result in adjustment problems, family tensions, and ultimately marital dysfunction.*

### **Marital Conflicts and Divorce**

Marital conflicts were a major theme in Pakistani dramas. These are often centred around lack of trust, financial problems, lack of communication, and interference by in-laws, especially mothers-in-law. Participants emphasized:

*Dramas frequently exaggerate marital problems and depict marriage as a continuous source of conflict and emotional stress. These depictions can distort viewers' perceptions of married life, leading them to believe that marriage is inherently unstable or problematic. This has the potential to change attitudes in the long run by reducing trust in long-term relationships and raising the question of marital commitment.*

The findings also featured the theme of divorce. Participants noted that:

*A few of the participants observed that television dramas depict divorced women as autonomous and capable of rebuilding an effective life, which can result in constructive attitudes towards female empowerment. Others at the same time expressed a worry that recurring depiction of divorce in the media might affect the attitude of the viewers, making separation an easy way out of marriage problems. This could reduce the focus on reconciliation, patience and problem-solving in marriage relationships.*

## **Female Independence**

The image of the independence of women was perceived as both good and bad. On the one hand, the rights of women, education and independence are sensitized in dramas. Conversely, some participants:

*Another observation was that excessive depiction of the independence of women in television drama can conflict with the traditional and cultural value particularly in the conservative societies. The two-sided image of women, ballet of modern independence and conservative requirements, can mix up and cause an inverted message regarding the proper roles of women in marriage and family life. It is, therefore, hard to reconcile the values promoted by the media and cultural expectations among viewers.*

## **Marriage, The Insignificance of an Institution**

The other important theme that was found was the depiction of marriage as a shallow or commercial relationship. In dramas, marriage is usually founded on revenge, monetary or family influence, rather than emotional compatibility and mutual respect.

*Participants raised concerns that these kinds of representations could diminish the perceived sanctity and seriousness of marriage in the sense that they are constantly being portrayed as a conflict, emotional breakdown and separation. These portrayals can slowly normalize poor relationship patterns, in which the lack of understanding and external interference are portrayed as inevitable aspects of married life. This can, in the long run, cause the viewers to adopt less tough stances in dealing with conflicts in marriage.*

## **Changing Gender Roles**

The theme of gender-role transformation indicates a slow transformation of the perception of society. There are progressive ideas expressed in some dramas when women are shown as educated, independent, and able to make decisions, and men are shown as supportive and emotionally expressive. Participants acknowledged that:

*These depictions can benefit society positively as they bring out themes of equality in gender and empowerment of women. Nevertheless, the participants pointed out that these positive messages are usually watered down or overridden by more negative discourses and stereotypical descriptions. Consequently, the overall effect is ambivalent, with both positive social messages and representations, which can support traditional prejudices and constrain their applicability.*

## **Discussion**

This study has conformed with other research findings, which indicate that Pakistani television dramas have a great impact on the perception and social attitudes of the viewers. Research has suggested that dramas tend to facilitate excessive expectations by focusing on wealth, luxury, and perfect relationships, and people compare their lives with those on screen (Ali & Batool, 2015; Mahmood & Khan, 2018). This analogy may bring discontent and tension in matrimonial relationships. Moreover, the role of media on mate selection and relationship expectations is consistent with studies that indicate that contemporary communication technologies and exposure to media have changed traditional marriage practices (Finkel et al., 2012). The portrayal of marriage conflicts in plays is indicative of the wider studies that have found that unresolved conflicts and ineffective communication may have a detrimental effect on marital stability (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Another important observation of the study is the increasing acceptability of choice marriages, which is a result of globalization and the shift in cultural values

(Yilmaz, 2013). Nevertheless, family norms and expectations still have a major influence on determining marital choices within Pakistani society. Regarding divorce, Islamic doctrines believe that marriage is a holy union, but could be separated under certain circumstances. The different types of divorce include Talaq, and Khula, which offer orderly practices in settling marital conflicts (Nasir, 1990). Nevertheless, the media representation of divorce can affect the general attitudes, and could make divorce a normal way out of marriage issues. The results also suggest that media can empower women and break the traditional gender roles, but at the same time, it may contribute to the development of negative stereotypes and unrealistic expectations (Abbas, 2018; Ali, 2019). Generally, Pakistani TV dramas are some kind of a mirror and a creator of social reality, which forms the attitudes to marriage, gender roles, and family life.

### **Conclusion**

This research concludes that Pakistani television shows are important in influencing the societal view of marriage and the relationship of marriage among females in Tehsil Mardan. These results propose that drama plays have both beneficial and adverse impacts, although negative images are predominant. Even though certain television materials encourage the recognition of female rights and gender equality, many drama shows give unrealistic expectations of marriage, ideal lifestyles and provide easy ways out of complicated marital problems like divorce. Divorce has been popularized as easy or an acceptable solution and marital disagreements are overly dramatized and no realistic resolution solutions are demonstrated. Such depictions may also misguide the viewers and create unrealistic expectations, disappointments and poor relations in marriage. These impacts not only affect the individual family setups but also can have a wider societal impact. Thus, the producers and sensor board of Pakistani television drama are advised to have more balanced and realistic portrayals of marital life. Television dramas can play a positive role in enhancing family relationships and in helping to strengthen social stability by encouraging values like respect for each other, communication, compromise, and cultural values.

### **Suggestions**

According to the results of the research, a set of recommendations can be offered to reduce the adverse impact of Pakistani television dramas on married life and to facilitate more balanced images:

**Content Regulation:** The regulatory bodies need to check and regulate the overrepresentation of divorce, marital conflict, violence and materialistic lifestyles on TV dramas.

**Realistic Storylines:** Producers of dramas are advised to concentrate on realistic and practical portrayals of married life, its problems, as well as its solutions, instead of idealistic or dramatized circumstances.

**Cultural Sensitivity:** The content of the television must not be offensive to the local cultural, religious and social values, particularly those that touch on marriage, family structure and gender roles.

**Healthy Marital Relationships:** Dramas ought to embrace positive relationships in marriage where there is trust, communication, compromise and mutual respect as opposed to never-ending conflict and separation.

**Media Literacy Programs:** Schools and media outlets ought to offer media literacy to the viewers, particularly young women, so that they too can critically analyze and interpret television programs.

**Equal Female Representation:** Women ought to be shown in various and real images, both in the traditional and modern sense, without being over-the-top or stereotypical.

**Positive Role Models:** TV programs should have characters that are portrayed to solve disputes effectively, be emotionally mature and well-bonded with family.

**Less Glamourization of Divorce:** Divorce is not an easy and glamorous procedure, but a societal and emotional procedure that has its ramifications.

**Promotion of Family Values:** The Dramas should also emphasize the importance of family togetherness, patience and problem solving in marriage to promote social cohesion.

**Local Community participation in the development of content:** Writers, producers, and media companies should involve sociologists, psychologists, and representatives of the community to ensure that they are telling socially responsible stories.

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