

An Analysis of the Portrayal of Women in PTV Drama Serials 1971-1990

Dr. Sadia Mahmood & Dr. Muhammad Osama Shafiq

Abstract

This research analyzed the drama serial televised with in the span of 1971 to 1990 by Pakistan Television which was the only channel available in that era. Being in direct control of the government it always followed the policies drafted out by the political influence. direct interventions of the political ideologies and lack of freedom in the institution, from that point onwards Pakistani drama regressed with such a subtle and swift speed that the understanding of the paradigm shift in our representation of women never even occurred specifically to the media industry and generally to the masses. The acceptance of a hackneyed and stale narratives resulted into retro gradation of the television plays.

Introduction

This study was based on the dramas produced by Pakistan Television (PTV) over a span of twenty years that is 1971 to 1990. The research was qualitative by design and it also included interviews of the women in the field in those times. The sample was thirty drama serials selected out of a universe of 130 serials telecast from all centers of PTV.

Methodology

The sample of 30 plays that were examined in this research, each story has been synopsisized and included in the data chapter. Each and every female character which has contributed to the story have been qualitatively discussed and analyzed for their character profile. This study specifically worked on the imagery produced in these plays therefore all such female characters which contributed towards the story line were analyzed with particular reference to their character profile. The categories coined by the researcher were designed to find out about the characters presentations.

This study would have incomplete had it not been inclusive of the reflections of the women who have been a part of this entire process. To achieve those oral histories were collected by the various individuals who have been conceptualizing, writing, and acting, directing and producing these dramas. These oral histories were necessary to be collected as women as a general norm in this patriarchal setup tend to be quiet about them. There have been no accounts of how they have been dealing and coping with the restricted environment not just by the policies but also by the gender bias and prejudice that is subjugating the contribution of women in this field. The input received by all the respondents has been both predictable and amazing as they gave new dimensions to the already existing notions about women in the entertainment industry.

Significance

It is important to understand that PTV as an institution monopolized the electronic media in the larger part of Pakistani media. It has always been in the clutches of the government of Pakistan. Pakistan, a country which has never had a smooth democratic political system, has gone through ups and downs and has always faced sudden political upheaval. From one dictator to a democratic leader to another dictator, this state has gone through one political ideology thrust upon it after the other. In terms of their ideologies, the regimes can actually be defined as following

- Industrial capitalist agenda
- Socialist reformist position
- Religious doctrine
- Chaotic charade of democracy
- Enlightened moderation

The country rode through these in the name of patriotism and national integrity which makes it evident that all economic, political and social change was not only radical but also unpredictable and unsystematic. The media also was victim of the same shallow and temporary policy framework. Print media was partially state controlled and rest was private nevertheless indirect controls and pressures were always applied, electronic media on the other hand consisted of PTV and Radio Pakistan which were the mouth organs of the government. In this research the time period which was taken has a clear demarcation of the beginning of one pro socialist regime and its sudden end after which an army dictator took over with an obvious religious bend.

Obviously PTV as a state own institution swung from one extreme to the other, struggling with constant stream of orders from the policy makers. Primetime Drama on PTV was the only dependable

source of entertainment that the masses had and PTV did work very hard to produce content which was creative and enjoyable. The problem was they never knew what could tick off the ruling government. PTV answered for set designs which were thought to be showing an opposition political party office; a character which was wearing a certain traditional piece of clothing implying that that particular province was responsible; serials were discontinued with immediate effect because they threatened the status quo; story climaxes were changed because it could possibly lure women into leaving homes and thus threatening the whole social structure of family system. (Nasir, 2012)

In the research arena the effects studies have been done on women regarding their usage of media but very few attempts have been made to examine the content especially in Pakistan.

The reason could partially due to the fact that entertainment is not taken as a serious content which could have any impact on the socio-political scenario of Pakistan, although as a nation the trend to use dramas as a main source of entertainment is very high. (Zia, 2008)

In such a monopolized industry PTV was the only source of information, education and entertainment which makes it imperative to studied for its content to make a critique on the so called Golden Era of Drama of PTV. As a first step this research closely inspects the female imagery provided and the stories that were told to us. The research did not include discourse analysis because that should be the logical next step.

Research Questions

The major research questions that were raised as follows:

- To see if stereotypes are being formed and reinforced by the roles projected in these plays.

- To see the influence of the politics on the projection of women roles.
- To see the gender power relation in Pakistani drama.
- To see the socio-cultural imagery of women televised in primetime.

Findings

To see if stereotypes are being formed and reinforced by the roles projected in these plays.

From the data collected, it is evident that stereotypes are being formed by these dramas. In all the categories it has been found out that women portrayal is highly stereotyped and the Pakistani woman according to these stories is

- Not educated: 65%
- Single: 76%
- Suppressed: 51%
- Not professionally engaged: 65%
- Very serious: 52%
- Positively oriented: 95%
- Traditionally dressed: 54%
- Has a perfect body: 89%
- Young: 86%

Majority of the protagonist in these plays fit the above mentioned criterion. The stories that have told by these dramas seems to suggest that life is about this woman who is eligible for marriage because she is young with perfect body, traditional, soft, and always has the bright outlook for life. On top of it all whether she is educated or if she is capable of holding any profession is of little or no consequence. The question is where is the everyday woman? If the popular narratives and stories are going to push out this image of a perfect woman who is the desire of the sex and procreation market then in real life the expectation will remain the same.

A twenty year span creating, producing and marketing this woman, who is no doubt also present in the real life, but not as much as someone who is not all this.

To see the influence of the politics on the projection of women roles:

Politics whether on national level or in PTV -on an organization level- has affected both the female imagery and working women in the field.

From 1997- 77 we can analyze the play that were [produced were rather experimental and liberal in the orientation. Obviously the then regime which was the first democratic set up of the country was keen on having an all encompassing electronic media (however that was not the case in news and current affairs program which were closely watched and controlled by the government). In this eras plays like Shehzori (1973), Khuda Ki Basti (1973) Parchaiyaan (1976), were produced whose stories were part of our literary heritage as well breaking the norms. The Shehzori character was popular and controversial at the same where a girl picks up a rolling pin to hit her father –in-law. This play was enjoyed by the Pakistani society at the same many conservative and religious groups raised questions and communicated it to the writer of the play. (Moin2016) Tara the lead character is the kind

of person who locks her father-in-law in bathroom and sits on the couch to eat apples and also the kind of the person who would jump off the roof to convince her father-in-law not to kill himself. In short, Tara is strong, opinionated yet soft-hearted.

Khuda ki Basti was based on a novel written by Shaukat Siddiqui, the story line of which deeply criticized the divided of haves and have nots in the country. This drama was telecast live in 1971 and then on the desire of the then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto it was produced again. (Nasir. 2005) The play dealt with many sensitive topics however few omissions were made from the novel with respect to child abuse, which shows that the TV officials were not ready to show that much truth. The drama focuses on other important issues as well; corruption, exploitation, faults in the legal system, poverty, unemployment etc.

Parchaiyaan was a play adapted from Henry James novel, "The Portrait of a Lady", by Haseena Moin. Moin recalls that since the story had a mistress, which this play had to show as well, it was a sticky situation for them, however they managed to pull through and the drama was produced and telecast without any issues. (Moin, 2016) the main lead of the play is very poetic; she thinks very highly of herself and wants to explore the world. She considers herself a free, independent woman with a bright life ahead of her.

This was an era of variation, with plays like Shama which provided the representations of a typical household with typical problems, with the female protagonist whiling her time away till her prince charming comes nevertheless it characters like Akbari who was smart, confident, ambitious and bold. Akbari however was shown as a character of negative orientation and was straightened out later.

In one of the plays Uncle Urfi, a scene was shown inside of a plane in which a female passenger was wearing a sari sitting and smoking, while that woman was an extra and did not have any

impact on the storyline, it depicts that Pakistani women were on the same level as men when it came to social behavior.

From 1978 to 1988 we can see a change of direction of the stories that were produced by PTV. Although PTV as an institution made many serials in this time period, the shackles by the then government became tighter and entertainment part of television was also scrutinized closely. The stories of pious and subdued women portrayal became rampant, the narratives became theosophical and dramas became sermons. Drama serial were disrupted in the middle, where writers and directors were forced to compromise on creative content. Two serials Aasmaan Tak Dewar (1985) and Jangloos (1988) were terminated in the middle of airing. In the beginning Zia ul Haq was of the view that television should only telecast news and no entertainment should be there.

Nasim Hijazi a famous novel writer whose stories were based on Islamic history was liked by Zia ul Haq, the then president of the country. It was notified to PTV that his novels should be dramatized so that the masses could appreciate the glory of Muslim governments. Shaheen and Aakhri Chatan were such plays which were produced in order to appease the President. Whether or not these plays were successful to achieve the goal is questionable but they did give variety to the regular TV content.

In those days anything which was deemed unfit by the government was called upon by the president house along with the General Manager PTV and the producer to be reprimanded. A drama serial Bandish which was aired in 1978 was written by Haseena Moin and directed by Mohsin Ali gained tremendous popularity. One day a call from president's house came ordering to send in the fifth episode of the play, landed all in trouble. Fearing suspension, the episode was watched and examined critically as everyone feared that some objectionable content will be interrogated. Simply put the reason was only that the President had missed the episode as he was out of country and did not want to miss it.

To see the gender power relation in Pakistani drama:

Going through the narratives of the television one cannot deny the fact that Pakistani drama portrays a biased gender power relationship for its viewers. In the thirty plays which have been synopsized the most obvious trend which comes out that all women have one common goal; A man in their life, who could be a lover, husband, father, brother or son. The female emancipation is achieved only through the men in her life. A woman is successful when she has a content bunch of men around her, who may appreciate her for her beauty, obedience and domesticity. Plays like *Shama* (19&6), *Afshan* (1981), *Zer Zabar Pesh* (1974), *Samundar* (1983), *Tanhaiyaan* (1985) etc belong to different time zones but they present women in the same themes and roles.

The women in these plays are frivolous, emotional, docile, domesticated, and eager to marry and have no ambition whatsoever. In one of the plays *Uncle Urfi* (1974) the female protagonist commits suicide because she cannot bear her father and lover's monetary deal over her. Her lover who claims to be her well wisher and trustworthy of all, does not take her into confidence regarding her father's intention because he thinks that she will not be able to handle the situation. *Shama* (1976) was another such narrative in which the female lead was shuttled around families and households until the decision of her marriage could be settled. Dangerously enough, these women roles were portrayed as willing recipients of this behavior and accepted it as their fate.

In another trend which portrayed women as careless, frivolous and shallow, it can be understood by plays such as *Shehzori* (1973), *Kiran Kahani* (1973), *Unkahi* (1982), *Tanhaiyaan* (1985), *Dhoop Kinare* (1986). (Interestingly the writer of these plays is the same.) The general impression about the female characters in these narratives that comes across is that they do not want to take life too seriously. On the surface these images seems like liberated and empowered women but deeply examined these plays turned them

into the same suppressed woman who is looking for some stability in life through a man. Her sense of freedom and carefree attitude is often ridiculed by the male protagonist and eventually she is converted into this abiding, obedient and serious girl fit to be a part of some man's family.

There are plays which are based on the themes of feudalism and capitalism, showing women suffering the worst. Waris (1979), Dewarein (1983), Jungle (1984), Suraj ke Saath Saath (1988) etc are narratives bearing the same subject. The story line is strong and based on factual issues in Pakistan but portrayal of women suppression is at its worst. Every woman is a victim in them, enduring, suffering and tolerating the social injustices handed out to her. In very few narratives a woman with her own voice can be found in such plays. The women are often portrayed in soft and domesticated roles whereas the men are the aggressors. The woman is an object and the man is the subject (Wood, 1994)

To see the socio-cultural imagery of women televised in primetime:

It has been decades of images which have been handed out to Pakistani society of the perfect woman by the plays which focus on the looks and appearance primarily. The major themes of the dramas are about men liking women at first sight, falling in love, getting married and happily living after. It is therefore a strong comment by these narratives that only beautiful women will be desired and accepted. The standards of beauty are also standardized according to the popular culture prevalent in Pakistan.

The idea of perfect beauty and body has undergone many changes historically. The most difficult times of all is the present day scenario where high standards of beauty are almost impossible to achieve, not to undermine the technology which has helped shape these ideas of beauty by using technical tools to artificially enhance features, size and weight of the role models provided to us. Pakistan has a country has rich cultural heritage, with Muslims

coming from various regions of the world and settling into the indigenous communities, later with the advent of British and colonialism, resultantly the culture that Pakistan has now is a good mix of all these ingredients. As Central Asian race Mughals and a white race from Europe ruled this region for long and put its imprint on everything that is why the light skin color of the rulers was a sign of supremacy. Those who have them are deemed beautiful immediately. Same was the case with height and weight. Obviously in a region which naturally had darker skin tones, a small part of the population could fulfill the required standards hence were highly regarded for marriage and procreation purposes.

Discussion

The two decades of PTV women have not really been different at all. The plays reviewed have shown fair skinned women in the lead roles, even if they were not naturally that fair, makeup artist would take care of that. In many plays like Shama (1976), Afshan (1981), Unkahi (1982) etc narratives show that the female protagonist is fair skinned thus labeled beautiful. In Shehzori (1973) the female lead character accepts that she is not good looking as the conventional way. She makes reference to the beautiful celebrities by looking herself in the mirror but is exceptionally aware of her moderate facial features and is quite content with them. At no point do we see her falling into the inferiority complex due to her color, figure or the fact that she doesn't know how to speak English. In Amawas (1987) the male protagonist humiliates the female protagonist by referring to her ordinary looks. A dialogue in Shama (1976), "tum to show case mein sajane ke laiq ho' (you are worthy of a showcase presentation) says it all.

The data shows that women characters' weight is mostly falling in the normal category which pointed out the fact that women images on television cannot be fat. In numerous plays women characters are shown to be worried about their weight. A very common phrase is "Moti ho jao gi to koi pooche ga bhi nahin" (if you become fat, none is going to want you). Although this sentence has

a general reference but subliminally it can be understood that it is a referral to sexual desire of the men who would only be attracted to thin girls. Why is it that women have to be focused on the weight issue just for the purpose of looking slim rather than be concerned with health issues today is that media is literally hypnotize women into fitting into the sizes presented to them.

The demeanor of an indo-Pak woman is also of utmost importance. Women are not supposed to run, jump, sit with their legs apart, lie down in front of any male member of the family and these ideas are also reinforced time and again by PTV dramas. As a society we indulge in body shame without even realizing what damage it has been doing to the self esteem of women in general. The woman in this society regardless of age, status and stature is scrutinized for her mannerism and the simplest way to belittle a woman is to criticize any aspect of her outward styles.

A very common objection is on the woman talks. In almost all the plays women were reminded to talk less and softly, smile more and laugh less, in fact preferably if they are not heard at all , would be the best case scenario. In a play Uncle Urfi(1974) male protagonist is describing his ideal woman: Main bara husn parast tha. Ek aisi larki ke khwab dekha karta tha jisse dekh kar ibadat karne ko ji chahne lage. Jo chale to lehrein banne lagein. Awaz mein itni mosiqi ho ke jaise narm narm phohar par rahi ho. Aur khana itna kam khati ho ke lage choo ker chor diya ho. Bole to itni aahistigi se jaise jharna behta hai, ziada bolne wali khwateen mujhe bilkul pasand nahin. (I am an aesthete. I used to dream of a girl, who was so beautiful that one would desire to worship her. Waves would form when she would walk. Her voice would be so melodious that it would seem as if it were drizzling. And she would eat so little that it would appear as if she hadn't eaten at all. She would speak as softly as a flowing stream. I detest talkative women)

After analyzing the entire data and research information it can be derived that PTV since its beginning has provided the society with stereotypes, as Ceulemans & Fauconnier presented this viewpoint

that women are put in roles of domestic perspectives and they are shown in regressive roles rather progressive beings. (Ceulemans & Fauconnier, 1979) the vulnerability is where the masses internalize the content that they watch with repetition and acceptance is generated within a large number of individuals of the society. (Zuberi, 1992) Since television is a medium which has taken the highest position in providing entertainment throughout the world and the even with digital media the basic content that is being viewed is coming from the mainstream electronic media (Chauhan,2003), the stereotyping has taken root in the minds of the audiences. Women portrayal is questioned across globe with reference to her positioning in the media and comparison to the real life. What is she? An object to be desired, a commodity to be consumed, a product to be used and discarded!

Arab world women (Obeidat, 2002) and Chinese women (Yunjuan & Xiaoming, 2007) are examples of the effect of politics on their portrayal; one being the hardcore Muslim society where are pushed back and unless and until they are empowered enough to be in the field and take charge of the situation the change will not occur and later being a strong communist country which has to tow the party line even when it comes to female images in media. Pakistan has proved itself to be no different where politics has played a key role in disconnecting and mutilating the real image of Pakistani woman from its entertainment ventures. This is not a surprise as television is a medium which coerces people to ape its role models from very early ages (Martin&Gentry, 2005) and eventually tricks them into believing the version of reality shown on their screens.

“Mass media is indeed significant in the reproduction of ideas and hence, important as a site of ideological battles and cultural transformation.” (Angles, 1989)

The dramas in Zia era especially from 1978 to 1988 can be specified as restraining and bonding women to their homes. The society is divided into sections, the domestic sphere where a woman should stay within the walls of their homes and even when

they go out they should be invisible by appearing in veils. Riaz too in her study highlights the concept of Chador and Chaardewari (Veil and Walls) with respect to the religious doctrines perpetuated by then regime, (Riaz, 2012)

The concept of a “Good Woman” also comes out of these narratives. Her goodness is dependent on her conforming to the societal parameters which are deemed the only working solution for her life. Her sexuality is taken and modified in such a way that is disconnected from the reality; therefore the mainstream televised content is ridiculously illogical. The only respite comes when alternative work is being with attention paid to representation of woman and her sexuality. (Macdonald, 2009) The plays under scrutiny also provided with such narratives but it can be clearly seen that the team behind those productions was trying consciously to present the real woman with her real desires and ambitions.

Limitations of the Study:

The main limitation that this research posed was the unavailability of PTV’s plays. The archives at PTV are in a dire state and access is difficult. Many popular dramas are now dissipated due to sheer negligence. During the process of data collection the discourse was demanding attention with respect to this particular topic, but that would have lengthened the study beyond the control of research however few dialogues have been taken and analyzed to have an understanding of the textual content.

The section of oral histories proved to be the hardest and tedious of all as television actors, writers and directors are famous personalities and are vary of scrutiny and criticism in the public domain therefore many personalities who were contacted and who affirmed to meet the researcher did not even turn up at the decided time and place. The hesitancy on their part is understandable but the problem that arises from such situation is that if these narratives are not recorded through these women in the industry then there will not basis for any future research.

Oral histories also presented another limitation, many shared incidences were not allowed by the respondents to be shared in the thesis. Once these women opened up, they shared many shocking tales which they were engraved in their memory but breach of confidentiality was out of question here. These sessions with the respondents were detailed and descriptive but many a times the interviewee replied with facial expressions and gestures which could not be recorded hence could not be included.

This is a review of a character from the PTV play Shehzori in 1973 whose female lead is called Tara.

“Tara’s personality, no matter how nonchalant at points, is exceptionally strong and grounded. She makes reference to the beautiful celebrities by looking herself in the mirror but is exceptionally aware of her moderate facial features and is quite content with them. At no point do we see her falling into the inferiority complex due to her color, figure or the fact that she doesn’t know how to speak English. In fact, quite the opposite – she takes everything with a sense of humor and wit. She is a confident and a loudmouth person but not the kind of person who is on the mission to hurt people with her words - her loudness can be symbolized as a tool to fight with the society which is constantly on the mission to subjugate her. However, her greatest show of strength lies in her two main traits – the ability to accept her fears and the ability to adjust and fight for her right after marriage. She tells Salma Bi how she was scared when Mustafa proposed her. The most important aspect is that of her massive adjustments after marriage in her behavior from controlling the use of lewd words to a change in attire from tomboyish to lady-like but here is the important thing to note – she makes adjustments but nowhere do we see her compromise to the point of empowering someone else over her life. She is sensitive as she feels overwhelmed with insults at times but doesn’t give up on her marriage even in face of extreme adversities. It’s hard to sum Tara up in a sentence let alone a word – she is the kind of person who locks her father-in-law in bathroom and sits on the couch to eat

apples and also the kind of the person who would jump off the roof to convince her father-in-law not to kill himself. In short, Tara is strong, opinionated yet soft-hearted and it's all due to her personality that she was able to withstand the trials that awaited her after marriage.”

Conclusion

This was the beginning of PTV drama, unfortunately direct interventions of the political ideologies and lack of freedom in the institution, from that point onwards Pakistani drama regressed with such a subtle and swift speed that the understanding of the paradigm shift in our representation of women never even occurred specifically to the media industry and generally to the masses. The acceptance of a hackneyed and stale narratives resulted into retro gradation of the television plays.

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