



Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Pakistani Drama Sar-e-rah: A Critical Feministic Perspective

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ARTICLE INFO			ABSTRACT
Article History:			<i>This research aims to examine the gender stereotypes in the context of Pakistani drama Sar-e-rah that has been aired on ARY Digital during 2023. Hence, the main objective is to reveal the way female characters of this particular drama seem to challenge the gender stereotypes and what sort of difficulties they face in the way of making their own identity. Butler's (1990) gender performative theory has been employed as the framework of this research and the sample includes the critical examination of three female characters Rania, Muzna and Marium. Content analysis method has been employed to analyse the data. The results revealed that Sar-e-Rah exemplifies a shift in Pakistani television towards more progressive and inclusive representations of gender. By challenging traditional stereotypes and addressing marginalized communities, the drama contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality in media. Future research could further explore the impact of such narratives on viewer perceptions and the broader societal implications of media representations of gender.</i>
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1. Introduction

The portrayal of women in Pakistani television dramas has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, reflecting broader societal attitudes and cultural norms. These dramas, as a dominant form of mass media, play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of gender roles and influencing social behavior. With a wide domestic and global audience, television dramas serve as powerful

tools for cultural storytelling and social commentary. However, they have historically been criticized for perpetuating rigid gender stereotypes—depicting women primarily as submissive, sacrificial figures and men as dominant providers or aggressors. These portrayals not only reinforce traditional gender roles but also hinder the progress of gender equality in society (Shehzadi, 2023).

In recent years, however, a noticeable shift has begun to emerge. A growing number of drama serials are challenging conventional narratives by presenting complex, empowered female characters and more emotionally nuanced male protagonists. This transformation is often driven by changing audience expectations, increased awareness of gender issues, and the influence of feminist discourse in media and academia. Despite these positive trends, the industry still struggles with deeply entrenched norms, commercial pressures, and censorship challenges (Kareem, 2023).

Despite these advancements, concerns persist regarding the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Studies have highlighted that many dramas continue to portray women in limited roles, often emphasizing their dependence on male counterparts and adherence to patriarchal values. Such representations not only reflect but also perpetuate societal biases, influencing audience perceptions and expectations of women's roles in both public and private spheres (Zahid, 2023).

This research aims to critically examine the representation of women in Pakistani television drama *Sar-e-Rah*, analyzing the extent to which these portrayals align with or challenge prevailing gender norms. By employing content analysis and feminist theoretical frameworks, the study seeks to uncover the underlying narratives that shape the depiction of female characters, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of media's role in constructing and disseminating gendered identities (Khan, 2025).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Pakistani television dramas have long been criticized for reinforcing traditional gender roles and perpetuating stereotypes about women and men. However, *Sar-e-Rah*, a recent drama, appears to offer a progressive narrative by portraying unconventional gender roles and highlighting social issues faced by marginalized groups, including women and the transgender community. Despite its popularity, there has been limited academic inquiry into how effectively *Sar-e-Rah* challenges entrenched gender stereotypes and what impact such portrayals may have on public perception. This study seeks to critically analyze the representation of gender in *Sar-e-Rah* and examine whether it genuinely challenges stereotypes or merely rebrands them within a socially acceptable frame.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To analyze how gender roles are portrayed in the drama *Sar-e-Rah*.
2. To assess whether the drama challenges or reinforces traditional gender stereotypes.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How are male and female represented in the drama *Sar-e-Rah*?
2. In what ways the female characters challenge conventional gender stereotypes?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the growing discourse on gender and media in South Asia by focusing on a drama that deviates from conventional portrayals. Understanding the narrative strategies of *Sar-e-Rah* can shed light on how mainstream media can serve as a tool for social change. The

study also provides insights for content creators, media scholars, and policymakers interested in using television as a platform for promoting gender equality and diversity in representation.

2. Literature Review

Tariq and Hussain (2025) through their research explored the representation of women characters in Pakistani dramas. Hence, the main objective of this study was to examine whether this representation helps to uphold the societal norms or seems to challenge those norms. Mixed method approach was employed and the sample contained two Pakistani dramas “Durr-e-Shehwar” and “Sar-e-rah. While, for the data analysis purpose, two methods were employed that were respectively content and thematic analysis. The results of the study revealed that the drama entitled “Durr-e- Shehwar” upholds conventional gender norms by portraying women as dependent, submissive, and passive while on the other hand, the characters of the drama “Sar-e-rah” challenge the conventional gender stereotypes in terms of pursuing the careers of their own desire and raising their voice against gender inequalities.

Jameel (2024) conducted a qualitative research to explore the attitudes and perceptions of Pakistani students towards ethnic stereotypes being depicted in Pakistani dramas. The sample of the study included 200 respondents selected from the provinces of Punjab and Sindh by making the use of purposive sampling technique. The findings revealed that ethnic stereotypes being depicted in Pakistani dramas are significantly influencing students’ perceptions of their own identities and others as well. The findings also emphasized the need to educate students in terms of the use of media and the need for providing procedures that can provide a more accurate representation of ethnic diversities in the country to reduce stereotyping of ethnic groups in Pakistan.

Toor et al. (2023) conducted their research to examine the gender contestation and identities in the context two particular Pakistani dramas. Hence, the main objective of the study was to explore the contested images of women in the selected dramas that were respectively “Jhooti” and “Mere pas tm ho” under the of multimodal analysis that was employed at three levels, image representational meaning, their interpersonal interpretation and also including textual representation. Further, the study collected the responses of BS 8th semester students from the two public sector universities of Multan city. The researchers used questionnaire as the data collection tool and the moto behind this investigation was to explore the way young generation perceive the image of women through their media. The findings revealed that Pakistani media is failed to portray the true image of women as it shows the women who stay at home as ideal and perfect while Portraying the strong minded and career oriented ones as the most rebellious creature.

Zahid et al. (2023) through their research explored the gender differences in terms of the language of Pakistani drama “Sun Yaar”. The paradigm of the research was qualitative and the researchers employed Deborah Tennon’genderlect theory as the framework of this particular research. The results revealed that female characters were using quite different languages having a strong influence of cultural and socetal norms and expectations that never allow women to make a bold narrative while the language of the female characters were bold and free from any sort of filler words that indicate their strong position in the society.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how gender stereotypes are challenged in the Pakistani television drama Sar-e-Rah. The purpose of this method is to identify recurring themes, character portrayals, dialogues, and narrative structures that represent a shift from traditional gender roles. The primary source of data is the complete series of Sar-e-Rah,

which includes all aired episodes available on the official broadcasting platform (ARY Digital's YouTube channel and/or website).. These include episodes featuring central female Rania, Marium and Dr. Muzna who challenge traditional roles. Thematic analysis is used to analyze the content. The episodes are transcribed and coded using the following steps:

1. Familiarization with the content through repeated viewing.
2. Initial coding to identify instances of gender role representation and resistance.
3. Grouping codes into broader themes such as "female empowerment," "transgender representation," "male vulnerability," and "societal reaction."
4. Interpretation of how these themes contribute to the broader discourse on gender in Pakistani media.

The analysis is guided by feminist media theory and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which helps frame the characters' behaviors as acts that either conform to or challenge established gender norms. This study is limited to the critical examination of only female characters in this particular drama.

4. Data Analysis

Sar-e-Rah is a Pakistani drama that challenges traditional gender stereotypes by portraying women in roles that defy societal expectations. Through its diverse female characters, the drama addresses issues such as female agency, empowerment, and the breaking of societal taboos. This analysis examines the dialogues of female characters in Sar-e-Rah to understand how the script contributes to challenging gender stereotypes.

The people who give respect to your daughter by taking dowry don't deserve to give daughter (Rania, episode 1).

These lines are uttered by Rania, the central character portrayed a well-known Pakistani actress Saba Qamar. She is a very strong headed girl and through her remarkable character she set a glorious example for her entire gender. She said these lines when her aunt who is also her future mother-in-law expresses the idea that the girls who don't bring dowry remain unable to get respect from their in-laws. Then Rania through her words challenges the societal approach that compel parents to give huge dowry to their daughters just to keep their in-laws happy. She challenges the dowry system, advocating for respect and equality in marital relationships.

Another occasion reveals the strength of her character when she decides to adopt the driving profession just to support her family.

Abu I have to drive a taxi to be your support, I don't want to get married. And mother who if people say anything, ask them to put grocery in your kitchen and take the medical expenditures of Abu, they will have the right to say anything. There is nothing to eat and you are concerned about what other will say (Rania, episode,1).

She is an ambitious girl who always wants to be a doctor but her father's financial condition doesn't allow her to pursue her studies. When her father became ill, she decides to drive his taxi to be the financial support of her family. Her bold decision seems to challenge the gender roles that always only see men capable enough to take the responsibility of their families and the women just as their subordinates.

Then the audience sees another strong female character in terms of Dr. Muzna, this character is played by Sunita Marshal. She has no child and due to this lackness, her in-laws always keep

taunting her and compell her to quit her practice in order to perform her domestic duties. But she proves a strong lady. To fill the gap of her life, she adopts a child who is left all alone by her own biological mother in the same hospital where Dr. Muzna serves. Although her family strongly criticized her decision and pressurizes her to return the child but she refuses. A part of taking this bold step, she does not give up her job also by these words.

I am a doctor, my patients need me and I cannot quit my job. Sorry (episode, 3).

The drama depicts another strong character Rameen performed by Saboor Ali.

Then the audience comes across Marium, another most strong female character. This character is performed by Hareem Faroom. in the context of the drama,

Tell me one thing, if the taxi driver would a man, then could I sit with him like this? (episode, 5).

Marium is challenging a deeply rooted gender bias and societal double standard. By saying, “If the taxi driver would be a male, then could I sit with him like this?” she is pointing out how society is quick to judge or raise eyebrows when a woman takes on a role typically occupied by a man—such as being a taxi driver—and interacts with others freely. She is questioning why it’s acceptable to sit beside a male driver without issue, but it becomes controversial or uncomfortable when the driver is a woman.

In our society, girls are always told the same thing that there life is incomplete without men and when someone harresses their daughter at work place, this is what parents do to make them sit at home because according to them this is the safest option (Episode,5).

These lines uttered by Marium not only serve as a food of thought but a big question on the gender stereotypes that always expect women to be the victim and withdraw her rights if they see something wrong happening to them. Same happened with Marium, she works in a multinational company where her senior male colleagues are insecure to her talent and dedication and never leaves any chance to tease and harras her and when she gains a project individually only due to her hardwork, Her colleagues see her success with doubtful eyes and express the idea that she must have used some women card and achieved this project by taking some shortcut. Marium decides to expose this harrassment Infront of her boss and said these lines;

If a girl leaves her house to work hard, first she has to convince her family then anyone in the society that she has a fine character and when ultimately she achieves some success, the sick minded people do not say even a single word of appreciation rather they target her saying that being a woman she must have taken some shortcut (episode,6).

Her dialogue reflects the broader theme of the drama: confronting gender stereotypes and advocating for equal treatment regardless of gender.

5. Findings

The Pakistani drama Sar-e-Rah emerges as a groundbreaking narrative that subverts conventional gender stereotypes prevalent in mainstream television. Through its characters, storyline, and thematic concerns, Sar-e-Rah introduces new dimensions to gender roles and identity in a deeply patriarchal society. The findings from the analysis can be categorized under the following themes:

i. Representation of Women in Non-Traditional Roles

One of the central themes in *Sar-e-Rah* is the portrayal of women stepping into roles traditionally dominated by men. Rania, the main character, takes up the job of a taxi driver after her father falls ill. This act challenges deeply ingrained gender norms where women are expected to remain within domestic boundaries. Rania's courage, resilience, and economic independence highlight the potential for women to succeed in male-dominated spaces. Her character directly contradicts the stereotype of women being passive, submissive, or confined to caregiving roles.

ii. Positive Male Allies and Supportive Family Dynamics

Another significant finding is the portrayal of positive male characters who support women's empowerment. Unlike the typical depiction of oppressive or patriarchal male figures, *Sar-e-Rah* includes supportive characters such as Rania's father, who encourages her to drive the taxi. This shift is crucial in challenging the stereotype that men always act as barriers to female independence. It promotes the idea that male allies can play a constructive role in dismantling gender inequality.

iii. Inclusion of Transgender Representation

Sar-e-Rah makes a powerful statement by including a transgender character (played by Muneeb Butt), who is shown to be well-educated, aspirational, and ethical. This portrayal counters the common depiction of transgender individuals as marginalized or ridiculed figures in Pakistani media. The character's struggle for acceptance and dignity not only highlights societal prejudices but also questions the rigid binary understanding of gender. This marks a significant step toward inclusive and humanized representations of transgender people in Pakistani drama.

iv. Empathy-Driven Storytelling

Each episode of *Sar-e-Rah* is structured to focus on a new character, each facing unique gender-related challenges. The narrative emphasizes human emotions, struggles, and moral dilemmas rather than stereotypical dramatization. For instance, the stories of single mothers, ambitious working women, and socially excluded individuals allow viewers to empathize with diverse gender experiences. This approach helps break the cycle of perpetuating one-dimensional characters and instead promotes a nuanced understanding of gender identity.

v. Subversion of the "Victim" Narrative

Women in *Sar-e-Rah* are not portrayed merely as victims of patriarchy; instead, they are active agents of change. Rania does not wait to be rescued by a man; she takes charge of her life and becomes a source of inspiration for others. This redefinition of the female protagonist disrupts the traditional victim-hero binary and portrays women as capable, intelligent, and autonomous beings.

vi. Challenging the Notion of 'Respectability'

In Pakistani society, a woman's respect is often tied to her adherence to conservative gender roles. *Sar-e-Rah* challenges this by showing that dignity and respect are not defined by a woman's profession, appearance, or marital status. Rania, despite being a taxi driver — a job looked down upon for women — is portrayed as morally upright and respectable. This challenges the stereotype that only domestic or conventionally feminine roles are "respectable" for women.

vii. Public Reception and Discourse

The drama sparked meaningful discourse on social media and in academic spaces. Viewers appreciated its progressive stance and its deviation from formulaic storytelling. It was praised for highlighting issues often ignored by mainstream media, especially the economic struggles of women and the realities of gender fluidity. The reception indicates a growing audience appetite for content that addresses social justice and gender equity.

5.1 Discussion

The Pakistani drama *Sar-e-Rah* emerges as a significant cultural production that actively challenges prevailing gender stereotypes within the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. Traditionally, Pakistani media has been critiqued for reinforcing conventional gender roles, often depicting women in domestic spaces and men as primary decision-makers and breadwinners. However, *Sar-e-Rah* deviates from this norm by presenting a narrative that not only breaks gender binaries but also empowers marginalized voices, particularly through its diverse representation of female and gender non-conforming characters.

One of the most notable ways *Sar-e-Rah* confronts gender stereotypes is through its central character, Rania, a woman who takes on the unconventional role of a taxi driver to support her family. This occupation, predominantly associated with men, serves as a powerful symbol of resistance against societal expectations. Rania's character not only challenges the limitations placed on women's mobility and employment but also portrays resilience, agency, and leadership in a patriarchal setting. Her journey reflects the everyday struggles of working-class women and brings visibility to their often-ignored contributions.

The drama further deepens the discourse on gender by incorporating characters that represent other marginalized gender identities, including a transgender individual portrayed in a respectful and dignified manner. Unlike the typical caricatures or demeaning portrayals seen in mainstream media, *Sar-e-Rah* humanizes the transgender experience, emphasizing their aspirations, familial struggles, and quest for identity. This marks a progressive shift in Pakistani drama, suggesting a growing awareness and sensitivity toward gender diversity.

Another critical aspect highlighted in the drama is the intersection of gender with class and education. Female characters are shown navigating complex challenges not just because of their gender but also due to socioeconomic barriers. These intersections allow the audience to understand that gender inequality is not experienced uniformly and must be examined through a broader social lens.

The narrative structure of *Sar-e-Rah*, which involves episodic stories of different individuals Rania meets during her taxi journeys, serves as a vehicle for presenting diverse gender experiences. This approach democratizes storytelling by giving voice to multiple perspectives, each challenging a different facet of gendered assumptions—whether it's a stay-at-home father, a female executive, or a person questioning traditional marriage norms.

In terms of impact, *Sar-e-Rah* opens a critical space for dialogue about gender roles in contemporary Pakistani society. By portraying characters who defy social expectations, the drama not only inspires change but also invites the audience to reflect on their own biases. It plays an educational role, especially in conservative settings where such discussions are often silenced.

However, the drama's progressive stance is not without challenges. While it has received acclaim for its bold themes, it also faces criticism from more traditional segments of the audience who

perceive it as a threat to cultural norms. This tension highlights the ongoing struggle between progressive media narratives and entrenched patriarchal values in Pakistan.

In conclusion, *Sar-e-Rah* stands as a transformative piece of media that boldly interrogates and redefines gender stereotypes. It contributes to a broader movement within Pakistani popular culture that seeks to promote gender equity, inclusivity, and social justice. Through its storytelling, character development, and thematic focus, the drama challenges the audience to reconsider entrenched beliefs and embrace a more equitable representation of all genders in both media and society at large.

5.2 Conclusion

Sar-e-Rah exemplifies a shift in Pakistani television towards more progressive and inclusive representations of gender. By challenging traditional stereotypes and addressing marginalized communities, the drama contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality in media.

5.3 Future Implications

Future research could further explore the impact of such narratives on viewer perceptions and the broader societal implications of media representations of gender.

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