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**Recontextualization of Ideologies: A Critical Study of Tabooed Representation in  
Pakistani TV Dramas**

\* Dr. Shaista Zeb

\*\* Dr. Ubaidullah Khan

\*\*\* Muhammad Ajmal (Corresponding Author)

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**Abstract**

*Taboo is a religiously and socially prohibited practice. In a society, known for its conservative approach and attitude, several subjects have long not been discussed in a public discourse. This study explores how the media revolution of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is changing this situation by compromising and recontextualizing these taboos, as depicted through a text or talk. In recent years, the country's private TV industry has depicted some highly unpleasant topics in its dramas. The critical perspective of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) probes deeply into the discourse of TV dramas to uncover the hidden ideologies behind the words in broader social and cultural contexts. To show this change, this study analyzes six Pakistani dramas dealing with hitherto tabooed topics to reveal the pros and cons of the growing ideological trends in Pakistani TV Dramas. First, the study outlines the significance of drama in shaping and recontextualizing ideologies. Second, it outlines certain salient taboo features applicable to almost every play. Finally, it suggests a few improvements in a bid to make things better.*

**Keywords:** Recontextualizations of Ideologies, Taboos, Pakistani TV Dramas, Critical Study.

**Introduction**

Religion and society shape our world. Good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vile have always been decided by either or both of them. Different sets of values define and differentiate one religion and region from another and usually pertain to a social reality (Knoll & Eisend, 2011) and social roles assigned to individuals as are presented through the media (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). The media, in turn, affects the way people perceive their social realities and also takes an important part in shaping different roles existing in a society. The interesting element to find in media is their portrayal of breaking and challenging stereotypes over some time in public discourse.

Television is the most popular form of media in Pakistan and has been given more attention by Pakistanis compared with other media. Religious teachings as well as social norms outline the do's and the don'ts that each member of a society is supposed to strictly adhere to. Practices prohibited by religion and/or society are termed taboos. Socially speaking, the East and the West were once worlds apart. While the West briskly moved toward what it called 'modernity,' the East chose to maintain its traditional conservative face. The media has made giant strides in a bid to bridge the hitherto-held gap between the two sides.

Shelving the centuries-old maxim of 'all that glitters is not gold,' the Pakistani TV industry has also gone blind to go Western in exposing many a phenomenon. All our media outlets seem interested in are their damned ratings. The whole phenomenon relates to the recontextualization of ideologies in both positive and negative ways as far as discourse in a society like ours is concerned. The 1990s was probably the prime period of Pakistani drama. In the absence of any competitors whatsoever, the state broadcaster (PTV) produced hundreds of great classics. When wealth, vulgarity, and romance weren't the only concerns of the writers and producers, they paid attention to portray life as it was maintaining the ideology of Pakistan. One after another of the family-oriented plays preached positivity that maintained a healthy discourse depicting Eastern ideologies. The fame of the true *Pakistani dramas had been such a fame that even people from the other side of the border watched and liked them. People still recall such dramas as Dhawan, Unkahi, Dhoop Kinaray,*

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\* National University of Modern Languages Islamabad, Lahore Campus

\*\* University of Taif

\*\*\* University of Lahore

*Tanhaiyan, and so on. When such concepts as jihad and patriotism were not manipulated through vested interests the PTV produced gems like Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and the Nishan-i-Haider series that maintained a discourse of integrity. Today, the social barrel to a taboo is broken too. The 'no-no' of the past is hence rendered a matter of trend in the present.*

Since, social realities and social roles assigned to individuals are presented through media (Brooks & Hebert, 2006), it is crucial to explore the media representation of gender roles. After private groups were allowed to freely and independently operate their TV channels in Pakistan, most of them gradually began showing dramas that dealt with previously unaddressed taboo themes (naked social realities). This study explores the same trend by considering six plays on-air on various small-screen houses. Though some scholars have previously undertaken the taboo from this part of the world, they largely remained restricted to the TV advertisements. When it comes to TV drama, there's very little to be found. Two IUI scholars (Dr. Ali Asghar Shah and Muhammad Bilal Bhatti) did a decent job in this regard. Yet, to their discretion, they only quantitatively analyzed a few prime-time serials played on Hum TV. The current paper qualitatively deals with more than one channel to make it more diverse and comprehensive. Besides, most previous works turn out a mere simplification or generalization of the real issue at hand. This researcher for the first time dares to take up the TV taboo as it is a part of re-establishing discourse and ideologies.

**Research Objectives:**

The current study aims to address the rising taboo topics as depicted in the 21st century Pakistan TV dramas maintain taboos in public discourse. While doing this, I aim at the following objectives:

- To outline the significance of tabooed representation in TV drama in shaping and re-contextualizing ideologies
- To suggest a few improvements in a bid to make things better.

**Research Question:**

Through a detailed analysis of half-a-dozen modern Pakistani TV dramas, this study is an attempt to answer the following question concerning the growing trend of taboos in Pakistani dramas:

- How do today's Pakistani dramas speak of the hitherto unspeakable by challenging stereotypes?

**Research Delimitation:**

This research is delimited to:

- The analysis of a few Pakistani TV dramas of recent times to reveal tabooed topics with ideological implications.
- Only six modern-day dramas on-air on famous media networks: Roag, Udaari, Kitni Girhein Baqi Hein, Khuda Mera Bhi Hai, Chup Raho, and Dil To Bhatkay Ga.

**Literature Review:**

*Television is a domestic cinema that provides entertainment to people of all ages with a wide range of programs (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). Among the TV programs, the most significant form is the TV dramas (Robinson and Martin, 2008). TV dramas may provide a spellbound mechanism to control people's attitudes and behavior in several ways (Cashmore, 2002). While the growing trend is generally highly disapproved, certain circles also see some positives in it. The latter group believes that by bringing taboos to life, our modern drama has made it possible to address several important issues that were not even talked about previously.*

*According to the proponents, the breaking of social taboos is a 'brave and bold' move towards enlightening and broadening minds: the first step to 'real progress.' Syrian drama, in a tightly-controlled and highly-conservative society, has recently dared to deal with such taboos as corruption, terrorism, and poverty. "The Renegades" is a play that presents Muslims' poor plight in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Iraq, Egypt, and Damascus. According to Najdat Anzour, this drama's director: "Syrian dramas deal with contemporary issues.' Renegades is an education for a young generation who are seeing violence on their television screen every day, but who need to know more about how it is happening." "The Beautiful Maidens," another drama, touches yet another taboo topic. In it, he doubtfully questioned if seventy-two virgins "awaited" a suicide-bomber "in the paradise." A great success, the play was watched by over 50 million people in the Arab world. Rasha Sharbatji is a young Syrian director who is out to challenge the political taboo in her country. "Gazelles in the Forest of Wolves" is a play that bravely brings out corruption of government officials and the bureaucracy. Samer, the leading character, is a government official's son who loots wealth*

with both hands while the poor majority can barely make both ends meet. Confirming its unprecedented success, she said: "I want to give a warning to those young men who live like Samer that Syrians are now more aware. The message certainly got across to the street. Since the series began showing I have received lots of calls from people I don't know asking: Do you mean me?" In a recent *Financial Times* article, Alev Scott makes several significant observations: "We live in an age where subjects such as rape, suicide and drug abuse dominate popular culture." Quoting her sister Ceylan, she writes: "I don't like them [the taboo themes] because they are triggers in themselves. If you are warned that something you're about to read or watch is upsetting, you're already primed to be upset." And yet, Ceylan plans to publish a partly-autobiographical novel about a suicidal teenager in a psychiatric ward. Drawing the world's attention towards yet another aspect of the present subject, she also envisages a certain 'clash between exploding taboos and protecting people from the fallout of that explosion.'

TV dramas have a long history of being the most popular form of 'moving fiction' in Pakistan. A drama is undoubtedly the best kind of infotainment (information + entertainment) in an era of anxiety. We are a vexed and worried generation; be they old people, the youth, or the kids, gloom is written on almost every face. The opportunities to bring satisfied genuine smiles are shrinking. In such a scenario, the drama becomes a dear diversion.

There are different takes on the rapid tabooing of the Pakistani drama. According to Ashfaq and Shafiq (2018), TV dramas have long been portraying the traits of perfect versus the worst women. The continuous depiction of such portrayal is an intended reflection of a patriarchal society. Also, they intend to shape and reshape the ideologies of the patriarchal society. Bhargava (2009) considers such stereotypical images as a psychological process where certain specific roles are allocated to men and women in a society. Ali and Shahwar (2011) revealed the stereotypical gender roles in Pakistani TV media where men are committed to their work but women are committed to their men only. Sheikh, Fraz, Bhugio, and Kadri (2015) discovered gender inequality via examining stereotypical images of males and females in Pakistani TV advertisements. In Sana Ali's perception (2018), Pakistani media is addicted to and keen on the representation of stereotypical images of male and females members of the society.

However, a recent trend has been changed in Pakistani dramas where tabooed representations are no more a forbidden aspect of discussion in the patriarchal society. The present study explores this novelty in Pakistani dramas.

### **Research Methodology**

Given the nature of the present study, a qualitative research approach is chosen to conduct the research process. This study also raises some serious questions and seeks meaningful answers – balancing the potential to impact the whole society. My topic is naturalistic in its design. It concerns real-world situation which naturally unfolds. Mine is an information-rich, purposeful study aimed at creating an insightful understanding of the phenomenon of taboo in the Pakistani plays and how they are recontextualizing ideologies establishing a tabooed discourse too among youngsters. Six Pakistani TV dramas make the data of the present paper. They are used as samples for content analysis. The analysis is specifically done in a bid to identify several taboo themes and talks occurring and re-occurring in these plays. These particular dramas are picked due to their controversial subject matter. The society we live in had hitherto abstained from talking about them. Thought to be displeasing and offensive, they have never been taken up before. All these dramas are those that I have personally watched over the years. The data is inductively analyzed in detail in a bid to discover certain themes. Since complete objectivity is virtually impossible to attain, 'my own voice' hasn't been silenced as per the qualitative notions.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Critical discourse analysis is quite complicated and complex in its philosophy being qualitative in nature. Its numerous and various approaches have made its procedure more complex. For that reason, the focus of this study is going to be on a definite approach of critical discourse analysis to gain a noticeable and ideal vision of a cultural phenomenon. As stated above, the investigation of representation ought to go ahead of the semiotic approach to offer or supply a more comprehensive analysis.

Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) approach is the most suitable theoretical framework for exploring and explaining text for the whole discourses entrenched in ideologies. This theory is principally

*derived from Foucault's elucidation and interpretation of the macro semantic system. It assists researchers to recognize discursive dissimilarity and antagonism among discourses and gain an insight into signifiers to find out what discourses they fabricate and which discourses are marginalized.*

**Results and Discussion:**

**Analysis of Chosen Dramas Salient Features of Pakistani Taboos (Shaking or Remaking Ideologies)**

A closer look at some of the broken taboos concerning the recent Pakistani drama industry expose the hidden agenda. As Barthes states of visual semiotics, every representation may have two possible interpretations: Denotation and Connotation. Denotation is 'what, or who, is being portrayed?' Whereas Connotation refers to what ideas, beliefs, and values are presented via what is represented (Van Leeuwen, 2001). The impressions of Cultural identity are lost. As the U.S. and the west continue to make material progress, there is a growing feeling that we can rival them just by replicating their accents and traditions in our context. The costumes and tones in our dramas are entirely westernized. Not only actors, but even actresses are shown wearing jeans and doing gender. Once supposed arch-rival in every field, the neighboring country has sadly become our dramas' new fascination. While some channels directly telecast Indian serials, the domestically-made ones too are Indianized to a great extent. Indian songs are a commonality. Even our Urdu is Indianized with an influx of Hindi words. Dramas are mind-changers and trend-setters. Unlike the old PTV ones, the modern plays are just presenting a negative image of this country. Instead of being proud of whatever is purely ours, they pretend as though Pakistan is a hurdle in progress for males and females alike. Every other male protagonist now aspires to go abroad to seek a better career by establishing anti-Pakistan discourses by saying that this is Pakistan one can survive here.

Even grave tragedies such as rape have been glamorized by initiating rape discourse among teenagers. The scripts are surely insufficient to draw viewers' attention to maintain any Islamic or Eastern ideology. This obvious lack in themes and stories is tried to overcome through vulgar means that nowhere maintain any decent discourse as in *Udari* a couple who himself is involved in an illegal relation is trying to help a victim as the word *Ziadati* has been used thousands a times unnecessarily.

Urdu is the forerunner in this regard by constantly showing Urdu-dubbed foreign plays. Bold Dialogues: There are not just "too bold" scenes here and there, but the dramas are also abundant with dirty dialogues. Everything needs not be openly and directly said. Several matters can fully be conveyed even in a restrained way.

Despite their repeated claims of "empowering" women, our dramas can't resist the temptation to physically abuse female characters. Girls are even slapped and shouted at by their male counterparts by establishing the discourse: *aurat ho her bak na kero*. Though religion permits the practice, society doesn't approve of men marrying more than once.

For today's dramas, comedy is another name of vulgarity. Some channels even on-air substandard stage dramas. The PTV-era still stands out with such works as *Haye Jaidi*, *Teen-Bata-Teen*, *Sach Much*, and *Family Front*, and so on. What about the Real Issues? Our drama presents everything other than the real issues of the masses. For one thing, not everybody is from the upper-class to afford the luxurious life we see on TV. Also, efforts at match-making aren't the sole matter of life and death either. Life-on-screen rarely has got anything to do with life-on-ground. All such themes and topics are serving western ideologies remaking a vulgar discourse other than just purposively highlighting the social or moral decadence. The portrayal is serving no ideology rather is shattering it. Following is the analyses of six plays selected for the current study:

**1- Road:**

Based on a novel written, this drama was on-aired on the ARY Digital for a TV-like ARY, hence, it was seen as a great policy shift when it decided to telecast this play. Among other things, it addresses the dark issue of child rape. This was a taboo subject having a very bold theme. In a society like Pakistan, people had hitherto tended to maintain an unbroken silence on the evil. *Nimra* or *Nimi* (*Sumbul Iqbal*) is the unfortunate child who was raped when she was only five. The story tells all about the unimaginable hardships the poor young victim's family was forced to face. It also throws ample light on how drastically that shameful incident changed the child's whole life. The male protagonist and others did complete justice to their roles while bringing to life an important yet

unpleasant issue. However real or serious the issue might be, most viewers couldn't still watch it with their families.

The ideological analysis via CDA reveals that the drama is portraying a taboo topic RAPE that is a harsh reality existing in a vulnerable society like ours that takes it as a shame topic that is hard to speak for the whole family as a discourse. Pakistani society is patriarchal but this drama throws light on the outcomes of patriarchy. Oppression can be found on part of female members too where females not only suffer yet problems they face are beyond imagination after the rape. CDA takes such narratives in these dramas as recontextualizing of ideologies by highlighting such themes. In Laclau and Mouffe's viewpoint, ideologies can only be constructed via discursive practices so such dramas for these reasons use nonstereotypes of a society.



## 2- Udaari:

On-aired only last year on Hum TV, it is deemed one the most controversial Pakistani serials. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) had to intervene when, in May, it issued a notice to the channel seeking immediate explanation over showing taboo words and themes in its fifth episode. It is essential to note here, however, that the media regulatory body took the extreme step only after it received thousands of complaints on Twitter. In its detailed notice, the PEMRA also highlighted two most offensive scenes: uncle (Ahsan Khan) trying to seduce his niece (Urwa Hocane) as well as his step-daughter. That was no doubt a tabooed representation of family relations. The drama infuriated parents in particular as they rightly believed that the open depiction of such taboos would promote, rather than eradicate, the heinous crime and vulgar discourse. Most significant of all, instead of lecturing Zebo to do the right thing, Arsh becomes a true hero by empowering her and showing her a way to take control of her life. He explains that any shame or guilt is not her burden to carry; all of it should be firmly placed on the perpetrator's shoulders, never the victim's. Zebo repeats the affirmation that Arsh teaches her: "*Main victim nahi, main survivor hoon. Main beychari nahi banoo gee, main apne mujrim ko sazaa dilwaoon gee. Sharm mujhai nahi ussay karnee chaNahi.*"The theoretically underpinned chairLNahiubanMouff's ideological inscribe can be seen in the tMujheiNahiressayat has been recontextualized with a new bold ideology in society like ours where victims are not allowed to speak. Such taboo words are giving courage but at the same time are being misused while tender minds watch them and feel all contradictory to societal surface milieu. In Laclau and Mouffe's viewpoint, ideologies can only be constructed via discursive practices so dramas for this reason use nonstereotypes of a society that reshape the ideologies by establishing them in an Eastern context.



### 3-Kitni Girhein Baqi Hein?

At the center of yet another big controversy was Hum TV. On 29th January 2017, the channel televised an episode titled "Chew Gum" of the aforesaid drama. Found guilty of promoting female homosexuality, the television network was fined Rs. 1 million. Sania Saeed and Farah Shah were the two controversial actresses. Previously also, two of the Hum TV plays (Humnasheen; Larki Chahiye?) were alleged for the same nefarious obscenity. Not just all religions, but the majority of societies across the world, see such immoral stuff with disgust. The unpleasant episode shows how cheap and irresponsible our media can sometimes be. Presenting such garbage is unethical at its worst. It is quite obvious that, mostly, the TV dramas try self-creating issues rather than addressing those that exist. It would be better if only that material manages to get through the censorship which belongs to the society we are a part of. While conveying social issues and the topics of great sensitivity, the makers should keep some aspects in mind and the most important of it is not to 'sensationalize' and 'glamorize' anything since the purpose is to eliminate the disease and not to spread it further. We often see people indulged in the debate of whether to show it or not? But it has always been about 'How to show it' because the difference lies there. These recontextualized ideologies are breaking stereotype concepts. Laclau and Mouffe's perspective regarding discursive practices and semiotic relevance reveals the non-dominant ideologies as converted to dominant and reflected via linguistic and paralinguistic choices (facial expressions) of the lesbians refer meaningfully to these social taboos. The words like *behuda* and *dafa ho jao* refer to overall taboo words.



### 4- Khuda Mera Bhi Hai:

An ARY Digital production, this drama positively addressed a very bold subject that was never publicly discussed or debated before. It deals for the first time with a largely side-lined transgendered community. Zain and Maha Gul are an educated and open-minded couple who wish to change the world for the better. They aspire to do something constructive about the growing inequality and gender discrimination. And yet, all this turns out a mere sham when they find out their firstborn is a transgender. The "liberal" Zain, as per the society's "custom," announces to disown the kid and leaves his wife. The wife's mother is extremely upset; the husband's mother would rather have the new-born declared dead. Maha Gul, nevertheless, makes the bold move. She decides to raise Noor (Furqan Qureshi) as a normal child. For this purpose, she hires a teacher (Aly Khan) who polishes his personality by treating him as his child. This is something quite unheard of. There somehow seems a sort of silent agreement among all segments of society never to willingly or pleasantly associate with these unfortunate people. We have to remember this: that they are different is neither their choice nor any of their faults. Asma Nabeel, the writer, told the Daily Dawn in an interview: "Parents either hide the reality and curse the child for the rest of its life, or give it away at the time of birth." Throwing further light, she observes: "It's not like the issue is not there, our acceptance is lacking. I used to wonder whether our [gender-coded] system of behavior is made by God or society. I realized that it is made by society. So, then, I wrote this story." A tabooed representation of the topic of transgender, highlighting, how has it been avoided as discussion. It is recontextualized in a new ideology of presenting such sensitive issues as a part of any society's discourse. Dialogues like "Kiya kahengay

hum logon ko? Humari bahu ney hijra paida kiya hai" and "Aur aulaad ho jaye gi humari, Chor do isey" give goosebumps and define the social stigma attached to our stereotypical ideologies.



### **5- Chup Raho:**

The story revolves around Rameem who gets molested by her brother-in-law Numair. She was set to marry this same guy's cousin Azar (Feroze Khan), but this unfortunate incident complicates things. Later, she does marry him, he constantly distrusts her. For a while, she was even pushed in the servants' quarters. When she tries to take her mother in confidence, she snaps her to remain silent. Her father dies of a heart attack when he finds out the reality. She ultimately marries Sheraz (Yasir Nawaz); a widower with three kids. The culprits do realize their grave mistake by the end, but it turns out too late. Talking about her play in an interview, Samira Fazal (the writer) put things nicely when she said: "It's a very relevant yet taboo subject, something people do not want to talk about." Bushra Ansari also deals with the same subject matter in her two serials: *Mere Dard Ko Jo Zubaan Mile* (Hum TV); and *Main Gunehgaar Nahin*. In real life, nevertheless, the rape victims still prefer silence for their and their family's sake.

Critical perspective to discourse highlights such resistant discourses where girls are struggling to make their voices but the stereotypical ideologies do not let them be discursive. It also reveals the lack of communication among family members. It brings into light another phenomenon that ideologies can be changed only when you are in a dominant position. In a vulnerable society like ours, such things and discourses are non-stereotypical and cannot be taken and presented as a vivid reality because the rest of the societal issues don't cope with them. Therefore it creates an overall confusion when tender minds ask for the explanation of such tabooed representations.



### 6- Dil to Bhatkay Ga:

Men and women folks have different roles in diverse societies and cultures. These differences are not only culturally constructed but also socially constructed (Moser, 2003). Presented on Geo TV in 2012, this play brings to life yet another tabooed subject. As opposed to the common practices, a woman -- rather than a man -- is seeking an illicit affair. Married to a feudal lord who badly neglects her, Yasmeen feels lonely and deserted in her peculiar surroundings. After her failed first marriage, she next ties a knot out of compromise. Driven to the extremes thus, she is all prepared to cross the moral boundaries to 'feel alive' again. Though religion has nothing to do with it, our patriarchal society's train of thought goes like this: Because bad men can become good, they should be given a second chance; but, bad women are always bad! Man's crimes can be forgiven. But, for a poor woman, there's just no reprieve. According to the critical perspective of Laclau and Mouffe's it reflects the female's recontextualized dominant ideologies transformed from non-dominant ideology. The drama shatters the stereotypes images of female folk existing in our society. This tabooed drama has allowed the girls to challenge gender stereotypes by listening to their hearts and therefore speaking their recontextualized minds. According to the critical perspective of Laclau and Mouffe's the ideologies change with discursive practices as has been reflected in this drama.



### Conclusion:

*Stereotypes are always found in every society and it has also been observed that most of the dramas in the past have been promoting and encouraging stereotypes. However, these stereotypes have been beaten and challenged in recent Pakistani TV dramas as explored in this study.*

*In Laclau and Mouffe's viewpoint, ideologies can only be constructed via discursive practices so dramatists for these reasons are using nonstereotypes of a society. This study deals with modern-day Pakistani drama. Religion and society prohibited certain practices in the past. With changing times, however, these taboos are gradually making their way into the public discourse challenging all reading existing ideologies into recontextualized ones. While it's not bad to bring to life certain silenced subjects, the fast-growing trend of allowing each and everything cannot be freely approved of either. Under the garb of freedom of expression, several circles are hell-bent on playing havoc with our traditional family values. While not denying the tides of changing times, our drama writers, directors, and actors must at least make sure that taboos are addressed gracefully. TV owners, drama writers and producers, sponsors, viewers, and the PEMRA are all responsible in their own right. Swift changes for the better would do the social miracle.*

### Recommendations:

*In this small space, the researcher could only qualitatively analyze six Pakistani TV dramas that contained taboo themes and are recontextualizing stereotypical ideologies. This breaking of religious and social conventions, however, isn't limited merely to our drama industry. To be truthful, everything shown on television today has completely changed. Be it sports, news, talk shows, morning shows, women and children's programmers, Hamd and Naat recitations, Ramadan transmission, or even the cartoons are no more the same. These aspects, when and if academically explored, would certainly make an informative and interesting read.*

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