



REFLECTIONS OF SOCIETY: The Role of Pakistani Television in Perpetuating Patriarchal Norms

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How has television been revolutionised in Pakistan over the past decade? What are some qualms to have with the current Pakistani drama industry and how it romanticises on-screen abuse and toxicity, in the context of crimes against women in Pakistan?

The television is finally switched on to the latest 8:00 PM special in accordance with what has received rave reviews lately. The entire family is sitting in front of the TV to tune into the shenanigans on-screen. Just a family, like theirs, going through the experiences and nuances of being Pakistani, with a sprinkle of some family-friendly

romance. A smattering of thinly veiled advertisements and product placements (we are a consumerist nation, of course) and loud, boisterous humour, paired with the usual mother-in-law and daughter-in-law dichotomy or domestic arguments. Of course, arguments and irritation are a part of the domestic sphere, but where are the laughs, the bonding, the drama of truly existing in a Pakistani household? These are often lost to the trajectories of violence and borderline macabre trajectories we see on screen. A little mumble, “Do they have to show this much violence and depression on screen?” from a concerned mother. But the question arises – why is the

norm on screen a show of violence, brutality, betrayal and families being torn apart? Why is it never focused on the little titbits, from the daily experience of an average Pakistani trying to get through their day, or family bonding in coming together, arguing, yet finding solace in one another?

The Pakistani television industry has grown of late, going from merely entertaining the masses at home to capturing an international audience – not only diaspora Pakistanis, but South Asians as well. The light-hearted, romance dramas in particular have found in them an audience that surpasses expectations. However, one cannot help but look at the TV screen and sigh at the regurgitated plots. Pakistan is a heterogenous country, so it's no wonder it has such a diverse set of backgrounds that span across cultures, ethnicities and communities. From the cosmopolitan to the rural, we barely see representation for the myriad. Where are the single mother households on screen? Where is representation for the dysfunctional family dynamics that break the mould of the nuclear family that is represented as the norm? Hardly any script writers have taken up the challenge of creating characters that are human and not an ode to suffering. One must imagine Sisyphus happy, but not if your plotline is a regurgitated retelling of a damsel in distress that requires rescuing from a saviour.

A major qualm to have with these kinds of storylines is how they are regurgitating the same sentiment to cash in on the insecurities of Pakistani women. The usual 'he said, she said, they said, divorce and intrigue' storylines rife with misogyny to cater to the majority women viewer-base that is already victimised in an inherently patriarchal society. By otherising the woman, she has to view the pieces of her autonomy be grabbed and thrown away over and over, even on television: this is termed 'entertainment' for the masses. Men mock it, terming it soulless and awful when it is the truth many women live through and watch just to feel for a moment, that what they're going through is real. It is disconcerting how often humour to laugh at, romance to swoon over, and positive themes most broadly speaking are simply shunned aside, simply to revert to the same old tropes: on screen violence and intrigue that plagues every plotline to pit women against each other and create the angel/monster dichotomy. The truth is not every woman is an angel or a monster, women are humans and should be represented on screen as such. It is also important to understand that families are dysfunctional but romanticising abusive relationships under the guise of entertainment is not the key to a more inclusive entertainment landscape, rather showing the dysfunctional elements and trying to heal them is. Romance does not always have to be a cautionary tale – Pakistani women should be allowed to indulge in love and romance too, without a constant sword hanging over their necks to caution them about the 'consequences'.

¹We talk about living in a society where romance is so taboo, but we create those taboos for individuals ourselves.

We need to think about the implications of what we are putting out as entertainment for the masses and the generational impact it will have as we continue to perpetuate cycles of violence through the medium of television.

Not only that, a recent storyline that has graced screens is one that sees the abuser woo the victim and 'change' over time after having crossed all boundaries, making her viscerally uncomfortable and indulging in harassment by every legal metric. But of course, he 'changes' for the better. This is represented to young adolescent women as a fairytale romance, something they should even strive for. What is often forgotten is that women are not rehabs for men without morality and boundaries, they are living, breathing human beings that cannot be reduced to their ability to 'change' bad men into 'good' ones. Young women are being taught not only to live in constant fear, but also to romanticise the glaring red flags of patriarchy that they should be told to stay away from, all in the name of entertainment.

This pattern has existed in the media for some time now under the guise of representing 'masculinity'. Women are not taught to be self-sufficient, or embark on a successful career, or break the bounds of what holds them back; they are merely shown to suffer, suffer and suffer more. There is no respite – you go through the motions of living in a patriarchal society on the daily, and then you go through the motions of reliving the experience on the television screen as it brings back rave reviews. A slap is fine if it is done for love, and if an apology follows. So is yelling, or using a patronising tone. When women are, from the very start, told they that must forgive the actions of abuse – how do we ever expect them to be conscious of what abuse is? It is merely an act to forgive, just like it is represented on the TV screen.

We must have a more conscious outlook toward the media that we consume; this is especially necessary in a society that is already brimming with patriarchal sentiments. We must be more cautious of what is put out on television to further elude one from ever achieving equality of the genders. Women have proven in every arena of life that they are equally as good as their counterparts. Then why must the torture of women be a source of entertainment for us? There are many shows currently on air that break this mould, and have gained much success. We must strive to carry this sentiment forward and indulge in storytelling that creates an impact.

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