

Framing Faith and Femininity: Serene Jones' Feminist Theological Perspective on 'Parsa' and 'Zara Yaad Kar' Drama Serials

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study examines the ways in which the Pakistani television dramas have influenced the societal understanding of gender by supporting the patriarchal beliefs using religious symbolism. With the emphasis on Parsa (2010) and Zara Yaad Kar (2016), the paper examines the ways in which the media discourse incorporates cultural and theological imagery to promote male domination. In these plays, men are also shown as symbolic lords or ethical protectors, Majazi Khuda who saves the women by getting married in a way that promotes traditional gender relationships Mawaddah or Rahmah.

Methodology: Based on Feminist Theology, the research incorporates the methodological approach that was used by Serene Jones, which is deconstruction, contextualization and agency to analyze how religious discourses are used to perpetuate patriarchal ideologies in marital relationships, especially in the discourse of Qawwamah.

Findings: It has been analyzed that these dramas are not only a reflection but also an active constructive influence of social beliefs through portraying gender inequality as a divinely authorized one, and inculcating the cultural norms in the theological discourse.

Conclusion: These images support the collapsing of cultural patriarchy together with religious morality as the naturalization of domination of women as a divine order. This research demands critical media interaction and creation of inclusive televisual discourses to go beyond the patriarchal dichotomies, to support agency of the women and encourage fair interpretation of faith within the modern Pakistani society.

Keywords: Feminist Theology, Pakistani TV Dramas, Gender Bias, Media and Cultural Discourse.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of the treatment of women in religions is an old area of social sciences and theological studies. Much literature in the social science has been written on how religious teachings and practices have influenced gendered roles within the society (Arimbi, 2009). Religious texts, their interpretations and cultural usefulness are usually discussed and analyzed by theologians in terms of female representation. The theological studies have worked in collaboration with the feminist scholarship to criticize the identity of women, the dynamics, and gendered norms that have been ratified through the religious interpretation (Kloppenborg and Hanegraff, 1995), to question the role of culture and spiritual worthiness as a determinant of the role in women. This analysis attempts to apply this trend of scholarship towards the Television medium of mass communication where the mass media is a social institution in the construction of mass identities, perceptions, and ideologies (Silverblatt, 2004), and where drama as a cultural product has a direct contribution in the presentation of social realities as a unitary worldview (Hall, 1997).

The portrayal of women in Pakistani TV drama is deeply conditioned by the social norms and religious beliefs (Faheem et al., 2024; Qaiser et al., 2024; Shabir et al., 2013). According to Jeffery & Basu (2012), such dramas, which are the most significant cultural tool within a culture such as the Pakistani, often embody, and encourage traditional ideas about gender roles and, without a second thought, establish stereotypical morale and ethically predetermined mass ideologies of human relationships. These sophisticated structures are usually merely created in media discourse of dramas. As the case study, two TV drama serials, *Parsa* (Hum TV, 2010) and *Zara Yaad Kar* (Hum TV, 2016), are considered to explore the phenomenon. Such plays have included religious excuses as a way of thinking by the characters to define the patriarchy as a divine initiative. These plays allegorically give men a divinity status that prefers women by getting married to them. Women are purportedly seen to go against religious standards when they fall in love with a minority religion man by mistake (Badar, 2016).

The reconstruction of feminist Theology, based on the original concepts of such researchers as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and Serene Jones (Hunt, 2022) offers an essential perspective on deconstructing this narrative. Feminist Theology aims at both criticizing patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and traditions to identify and confront the presence of power to the interpretation and promote feminine justice and equality (Isherwood, 2001). This paradigm is especially successful in examining the way in which religious symbolism strengthens gender roles in media. It is also relevant to mention that seeing TV dramas as the instruments of collective ideas, they become the means to normalize unequal power relations (Abu-Lughod, 2008), which requires a critical approach with the prism of feminist theology.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Women, Islam, and Pakistan

Women in Pakistan as the subject have been a wide interest in sociological research as the country is plagued with significant gender inequality, ranking 145th out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (ANI, 2024). Various researchers have reported that women are at disadvantaged positions in the socio-economic, legal, and political landscape, as they deem the country a dangerous place for women (Akhtar & Métraux, 2013). In an Islam-dominated Pakistani society, where laws, societal norms, and political structure are men-centric, often religion is seen as an agent of this women's subjugation (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Critics like Khan (2011) argue that historically, Pakistani society actively took up the project of women's subjugation in the name of an 'Islamic system' to construct a so-called centralized Islamic identity. Military Dictator Zia vowed to correct the course of the nation by targeting women on religious pretexts loaded with patriarchal codes of conduct (Zia, 2018). By intertwining religion with governance, Pakistan has often supported patriarchal norms, using them as a tool to define cultural and national identity. These policies and narratives restrict women's roles and have

served as a narrow interpretation of religion to reflect the ideological and political purposes of the ruling class and the state (Naz, 2017).

Islamic principles in Pakistan to advocate fair treatment of all individuals are often seen as the last source of justice and equality, regardless of gender (Khan, 2016), with an unfortunate abundance of incidents. The practice and interpretation of these religious doctrines have been shaped by patriarchal systems that historically marginalized women, initially promoting egalitarian values leading toward women's subjugation (Ayoub et al., 2022). The distorted face of Islamic interpretations has resulted in practices that silence women's voices and reinforce their oppression (Shaheed & Mumtaz, 1987).

2.2 Case of Gendered Interpretation of Religion

Gendered reinterpretation of religion has shaped new beliefs, panning away from traditional religious doctrines (Johnson, 2004). Some customs are attributed to religion; however, these customs are influenced by the patriarchal ideas of the societies (Sunder, 2017) rather than divine principles, succeeded in crafting culturally fabricated rituals to a shallow theological grasp (Marques, 2021). Many oppressive practices in religious societies do not come from pure-faith-based teachings; instead, they result from centuries of male dominance in religious interpretation (Preston, 2002) that has always emphasized the need to revisit and reinterpret religious doctrines to restore their original message of equality and fairness.

2.3 Women's Representation in Pakistani Entertainment Media

Women's portrayal in Pakistan by entertainment media has been a growing concern and scholarly interest (Abbas, 2018) as television dramas become increasingly crucial to examine. The Pakistani drama industry often promotes a narrow-minded constructed womanhood, ignoring women's roles in social reproduction and discouraging their image as professionals (Zaheer, 2020). Pakistani dramas show ideal women as young, slim, and beautiful. They wear simple dresses with dupattas, are less educated, and stay home (Ashfaq & Shafiq, 2018). If they work, it is only for money, while bold and career-oriented women are shown as modern and elite, wearing Western clothes (Huma, 2015). According to Khan (2020), Pakistani TV dramas also try to normalize domestic violence by associating it with the notions of honor and reinforcing cultural expectations of women's silence while struggling to restore family values. These dramas follow prescriptive gender roles, perpetuating patriarchal ideologies as contemporary Urdu dramas emphasize conventional roles for women (Masood, 2024). Moreover, their projection on TV is made more faith-bound in pursuit of carrying the mission of procreation and self-sacrificial roles for the larger cause of the family (Butt et al., 2021), connecting with their religious obligation.

Pakistani Urdu dramas frequently depict 'benevolent sexism', reinforcing gender hierarchies under the guise of protection and moral duty, even when violent treatment is given under a positive, beneficial context (Zulfiqar et al., 2023). The new trend in novel-based dramas on spiritual topics is drastically touching the conditioned religious contexts of masculinity (transcendent patriarch) and femininity (devotional submissive), stemming from social structures that need more exploration (Tabassum & Amin, 2020).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Feminist Theology

Feminist Theology is grounded in the works of scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and Serene Jones (Hunter, 2022), providing a critique of theological ideas; God as a male, maleness as the agency of prophethood, and good as male; evil as female concepts (Grrig, 1994). It investigates how theological nomenclature symbolizes male dominance and female subordination under the scrutiny of language and text, where gendered divine rhetoric privileges males while framing (fe)males through pejorative religious connotations (Radford, 1993). It rejects notions that men are closer to God or better suited to leadership and instead reconstructs core theological concepts to ensure gender equality (Tobler, 2000). Moreover, working for women's justice and change in society on a global level, it

critically examines religious narratives in their textual setting and then re-contextualizes across communication mediums in society (Grey, 1997).

According to Smelser & Baltes (2001), it rebuilds theology in different cultures having a goal to free humanity and all living beings by challenging androcentric religious dogmas, ideologies, and power structures (created around theological notions explicitly but having sexist underpinnings) to create spaces that support women's growth, political power, and fair communities. For justice-building and equality in society through new religious ideas and providing a critical framework examining religious and cultural discourses (Starkey & Tomalin, 2022), Jones's work explains that patriarchal readings of religious texts and traditions have been used to justify women's oppression. She suggests rethinking theological ideas to create narratives that empower women and question the existing norms (Jones, 2005).

The objective of this study by employing Serene Jones's methodological approach to feminist theology, which emphasizes deconstruction, contextualization, and agency (Jones, 1995), the portrayal of women in the drama *Parsa* and *Zara Yaad Kar* is to explore how these dramas integrate gender norms with theological symbolism, shaping societal views and influencing cultural perceptions of gender roles.

3.2 Research Questions

1. How do Pakistani dramas *Parsa* and *Zara Yaad Kar* construct patriarchal and patriarchal values to shape character relationships and societal perceptions of gender roles?
2. What narratives have been employed to emphasize redemption, loyalty, and moral responsibility to reinforce or challenge stereotypes about men and women in Pakistani media?
3. How do conflicts and contradictions in character portrayals contribute to the perpetuation of cultural and religious imagery, influencing societal expectations and norms in South Asian storytelling?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Framework for Analysis Based on Serene Jones's Methodology

The feminist theology of Serene Jones is aimed at a critical analysis and reconstruction of the gender narrative, discovery of bias in theological and cultural sources, and the dismantling of the power structures and the patriarchal paradigm of activity in this work (Hunt, 2022). It also brings these stories into the picture of history, and puts the emphasis on women resistance and areas of equality to make theological discourse inclusive and just in a feminist discourse. The purposive sampling of the two dramas is based on the fact that they are both explicit on how they incorporate the theological discourse into their gendered narratives. In every serial, some crucial episodes are selected due to the scenes depicting marital relationships, religious discussions, and moral choice, since these situations are the places where faith and gender ideology meet each other best. The analysis is based on the construction, deconstruction, and re-contextualization of religious symbols and dialogues to perpetuate or subvert patriarchal interpretations of religion in the media.

4.1.1 Deconstruction

To recognize and comment on the presence of underlying patriarchal assumptions and theological bias in the content. Extrapolating the dialogues, the scenes, and character relation dynamics to show implicit hierarchies of power. It will challenge religious or cultural symbols and language as an enforcement of patriarchal norm by exploring how religious metaphors or divine analogies like making men like Gods are used.

4.1.2 Contextualization

In a bid to position the content under analysis in a socio-cultural and historical context through the lens of how the demands of the society and religious beliefs influence the plot of the drama. It will examine the

extent to which the portrayal of gender roles is in line or out of line with cultural mainstreams, given the historical and present-day factors in determining the content of media production and the reception of the media produced by the audience.

4.1.3 Agency

To emphasize instances when characters (particularly women) display any sense of independence, disrupt conventions, or resist oppression by discerning actions and choices of characters that demonstrate opposition to patriarchal models. It will also discuss whether the story presents other ways or platforms that women can be empowered to dwell upon how such incidences can be understood to uphold gender justice.

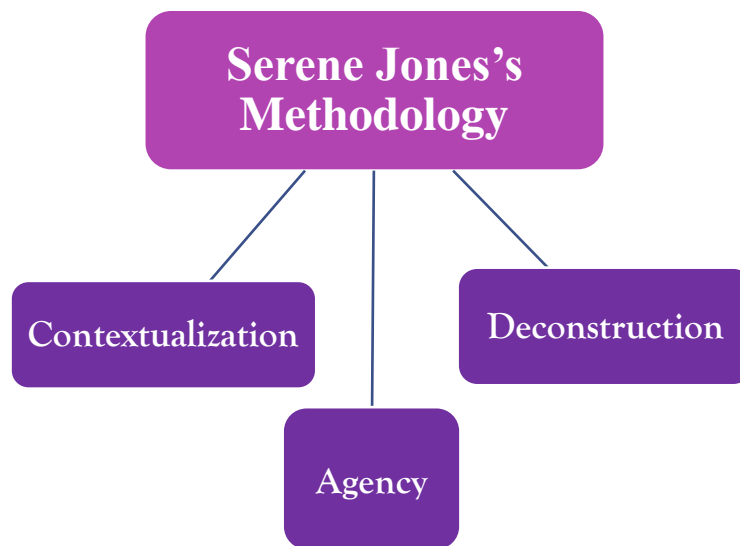


Figure 1: *Serene Jones's Methodology*

4.2 Operationalization

The analysis of Zara Yaad Kar and Parsa is put together using feminist theological prism; the fact that the themes can be used to identify, analyze and interpret (Braun and Clarke, 2006) the chosen prism of the research.

4.2.1. Patriarchal Theodicy and Gender Roles

It involves the ontological variable that in the process of cultural re-articulation, male characters are depicted as having divine qualities, including larger than life, beyond criticism, caring, providing, or commanding. The most noticeable one is the demand that the women are expected to be obedient and loyal. This will be analyzed under these themes where dialogues and scenes where men have been compared to divine figures especially in both dramas, in how the constructs of theology make male domination in a marriage relationship and the opposite justifiable.

4.2.2. Infidelity akin to Shirk: Reinforcement of male authority in relational choices

This theme explores the idea of shirk (Connection to God, and this symbolically relates to faithfulness in marriage), whereby a wife is loyal to God just in the same way as a Muslim worships God as illustrated in Zara Yaad Kar. It will also examine the play Parsa where the sense of guilt of marrying a non-Muslim man irritates and compels the protagonist of the play. Another theme is on how the religious analogies continue to reinforce and exert control over the choice of women at the expense of putting the men in a position of deciding what is right or wrong.

4.2.3 Redemption through Submissiveness

The exploration on the presentation of the repentance and redemption of women is guided by the theme of guilt especially in the play Serial Parsa where the spiritual awakening and personal development of Parsa is portrayed with an understanding towards submission, affirmation, and forgiveness. This theme will discuss how these stories conform to the conventional gender expectations and theological constructs in order to supposedly propose that a woman is redeemed in regard to adhering to the societal norms.

4.2.4 Divine Justice vs. Patriarchal Justice

This theme is going to examine the interplay of ideas of divine justice with patriarchal concepts of morality especially in the way the characters react to betrayal and infidelity. Most importantly, in Zara Yaad Kar, Mahnoor is evaluated negatively, when Hadi is evaluated as a morally straight person, although both characters are working in the complicated emotional environment. The agency of the male is a catalyst to religious redemption in Parsa.

4.2.5 Spiritual Agency and Female Identity

It will shine light on instances where the female characters are shown to have spiritual or intellectual agency, which defies the narratives that restrict them to passive characters. The eventual enlightenment of Parsa in Parsa will be examined as a reclamation of agency albeit under the limitations of the society and religion.

4.2.6 Marriage as a Divine Institution

It will comment on how the framing of marriage has been done as a divine project with the male authority as the central point and the women as secondary with their roles being servitude and loyalty by comparing how both dramas utilize theology imagery to romanticize marriage relations, despite being portrayals of tainted human relations.

4.2.7 Moral Responsibility and Double Standards

Diving into the moral responsibility in the concept of moral responsibility of men and women that is double-folded. As an illustration, in Zara Yaad Kar, the fact that Mahnoor pursues Waqar is not justified at the expense of opportunism by Waqar. This theme will be a criticism on the way patriarchal theology clears out the male characters of the same level of scrutiny.

4.2.8 Impact of Cultural and Religious Imagery

Learn how cultural customs and religious stories are combined to approve gender roles and societal anticipations in the TV dramas that present icons such as prayer, repentance and divine forgiveness with an aim of framing behaviors and outcomes of women.

4.2.9 Feminist Theology and the Question of Forgiveness

It will discuss the gendering of forgiveness and reconciliation using Feminist Theology, as exemplified by the work of Serene Jones, whose concepts of agency and context are relevant to the issue.

5. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 Deconstruction of the Drama *Zara Yaad Kar* Using Serene Jones' Methodology

5.1.1 Drama's Plot and Characters' Dynamics

Fundamentally, *Zara Yaad Kar* is narration of a complicated love triangle, emotional pain among characters who are crossing the borders of love, trust, betrayal, and self-discovery. The storyline is based on the connection between Hadi, Mahnoor, Uzma, and Waqar and their life struggles and how the society influences their choices. Hadi is a plain, loving man that is in love with his wife, Mahnoor. Although he has few financial assets, he is a good husband who does everything that he can to help Mahnoor. Mahnoor, however, is first introduced as a selfish and materialistic person, who wants to find love and security without the marriage with Hadi. She feels attracted to Waqar who is a better-off and better-looking man which makes her request Hadi to divorce her. The character portrayed by Hadi is based on the values of selfless love, and the character portrayed by Mahnoor is the struggle of lust and materialism and the need to find a better life. The character of Waqar who is presented as a teacher and as a manipulative opportunist is one of the main characters that help Mahnoor to decide to abandon her marriage. This is what generates a tension between the characters that are the foundation of the drama. The play then proceeds to discuss the breakdown of the lives of these characters who make choices according to their wishes and the power structure that arises amongst them. The life of Mahnoor is characterized by the feeling of regret and his efforts to get into terms with Hadi and internal conflict in Hadi is based on his attitude towards her and his emotional pain as a result of her behavior. Strong, authoritative men and submissive, nurturing, or non-mainstream women are common in such types of narratives, which in turn perpetuates the notion that men are supposed to be the most powerful people and women are supposed to be subordinates (Pop, 2016). As it is clear in one of the scenes of the drama. Mahnoor is pressuring Hadi to divorce her and the mother pressures Hadi to slap her in case she demands a divorce. Since Hadi refuses or hesitates to do so, in the dialogue translated below, she complains that he is Hjjra, which is an Urdu word translated as the third gender:

Dialogue 1.

Mahnoor's Mother: If she asks for a divorce, slap her across the face."

Hadi: "I will, but what if she slaps me back?"

Mahnoor's Mother: "Wow, son, just perfect. Go ahead, ruin the reputation of men entirely. And yes, if you do get slapped, go straight to the ID card office and file a complaint that I mistakenly listed myself as male under the gender category."

This informs us of the importance of conflict and contradiction in the development of stories, enhancement of characters, and advancement of the story as it brings out the strengths, weaknesses, and development of characters that is relatable (Swain and Swain 1988). Nonetheless, conflict should not strengthen stereotypes and identifying males as dominant or females as passive as gender roles can instill harmful stereotypes in society and simplify human behavior (Iyer, 2024). It is clear how the contradictions in *Zara Yaad Kar* are shown when we consider the swelling and fading emotions and motivations of the main characters. First, the selfishness of Mahnoor and her need to find a rich husband (Waqar) is opposite to selflessness of Hadi and his profound love to her. This is seen when Mahnoor does not only demand a divorce with Hadi but also tries to reason out her behavior by making comparisons between the attributes of Hadi and Waqar.

Conversely, another contradiction comes out in the reaction Hadi gave to the request Mahnoor requested to divorce him: he loves her very much but prefers to see her go by thinking that she truly loves Waqar. The choice he makes, hurt as it was, shows how multifaceted his personality is, he cannot keep on with someone who does not love him despite his strong feelings towards her. With the development of the drama, the characters start feeling the effects of their acts. The attraction that Mahnoor had towards Waqar disappears as she sees what is actually happening to him and she starts regretting her choices. This

is the contradiction in character that is shown when she is no longer selfish but remorseful. She was initially pursuing freedom and wealth, but as she later came to understand the emptiness of these things. Likewise, after finding all his heart broken, Hadi feels disappointed with the actions of Mahnoor and he begins to see the weaknesses in their relationship.

5.1.2 Understanding the Power Dynamics and Character Relationships

The cultural practices and religious interpretation as well as the expectations of society commonly define power dynamics in marriage in Pakistani society (Subhani et al., 2024). In most cases, men are perceived as the main decision-makers and providers, whereas women are supposed to perform housekeeping and follow their husbands under the influence of deeply rooted expectations that subjugate male authority and female obedience in a system of power inequality and distributed and negotiated within by familial and social obligations (Masood, 2024). One point that deserves to be mentioned regarding Zara Yaad Kar is that power relations are formed in relations between the characters as the struggle of power is most apparent in the love triangle between Hadi, Mahnoor and Waqar (Ashfaq and Shafiq, 2018). Waqar is first introduced as someone pretty and wealthier than Mahnoor hence imbalance in the relationship; as the story unfolds, the real character of Waqar comes out and the power dynamics is once more shifted. At first glance, Waqar appears more desirable, but it turns out to be manipulative and opportunistic.

The first feeling that Mahnoor feels towards Waqar is the need to have material things and social identity, which she thinks will make her happy and secure. This is opposed with that of Hadi whose love is pegged on emotional attachment and devotion. The story reveals the weakness of Mahnoor in thought since love and dedication cannot be lowered to material possession and physical appeal. The relationship of power between the two characters is inverted as Mahnoor develops new emotions and starts to apologize to Hadi.

Among the strongest scenes in the play is when Hadi overhears Mahnoor saying that she does not respect him and a life together is like a prison term. This is a turning point in the life of Hadi as he realizes that his selfless love to her has not been reciprocated. Their relationship has changed in terms of power and the one who used to possess all the emotional power is no longer the one who betrays, but it is Hadi who needs to make a decision on whether to readmit Mahnoor to his life.

5.1.3 The Role of Societal Norms and Expectations

The other factor that can be highlighted in deconstruction of Zara Yaad Kar is the social norms and expectation on love, marriage and gender roles because the play reaffirms the traditional beliefs of marriages and commitment, particularly in the case of Hadi and Mahnoor. The fact that Hadi is so devoted to Mahnoor, an otherwise selfish woman, can be seen as a traditional image of marriage, as a husband is supposed to be selfless and devoted to his wife (Rehman, 2016). Nevertheless, the deeds of Mahnoor contradict these ideals, as she tries to find independence in her marriage to do what she wants. Her choice to divorce Hadi and remarry Waqar, as a result of societal expectations of love and marriage, in terms of materialism and self-benefit and not emotional attachment.

5.2 Contextualization Drama Zara Yad Kar

5.2.1 Patriarchal Theodicy and Gender Roles

Cultural ideologies are usually reflected in the dramas as products of their society and support social norms (Zhao & Chsing, 2024). In Zara Yaad Kar, male characters are depicted with characters that position them to godlike status. This is consistent with the concept of patriarchal theodicy in which the main character, a male, Hadi, has the characteristics of compassion, forgiveness and wisdom, the qualities commonly linked to holy figures. Not only does such representation glorify male authority, but there is also an implicit command to conform and to be submissive on the part of women. This concept is brought out very clear when the mother of Mahnoor (female lead) provides her with the philosophy of the

preferred option of marriage as opposed to having illicit relationships with a male and then identifies this option of the males with the supernal being.

The (translated) dialogue goes:

Dialogue 2.

Mahnoor's Mother: Once, your father said, "Think and tell me, why a man get marries?" I genuinely started thinking. If you calculate the monthly expenses, a wife costs more than an outsider woman. Yet, a man still gets married. He spends lakhs on the wedding, fulfills his wife's desires beyond his capacity, finds a roof for her, works hard for her comfort, endures the sun, burns in the furnace of labor, and when needed, he even sells his ego or, at times, his skin for her. Do you know why? Ask me, why?

The daughter hesitantly asks her mother, "Why?"

The mother replies, "Because this habit of a man is like God's. Just think, why did God need to create billions of humans? And then provide for their food, shelter, and other needs? But maybe He needed it. He wanted a creation that would worship Him and bow to Him. And the more someone worships Him, the more He cares for them.

5.2.2 Infidelity akin to Shirk

Strengthening of male control in choice of relationships. Highly promoted to the status of a sacred covenant with infidelity, in Zara Yaad Kar, is meted out as a betrayal that is equal to shirk or to link associates to God. This comparison adds more pressure to the situation of female characters, such as Mahnoor, whose allegiance is framed as a challenge of moral and spiritual purity; her emotional and interpersonal decision-making is evaluated ruthlessly, and Hadi is relatively morally unscathed despite his challenges. This difference highlights the role of the patriarchal norms that tend to amplify the actions of women and make them central to the ethical aspects of relations. The next section of the conversation in episode 17 of the play Zara Yad Kar identifies the infidelity of the women with shirking with no fear of being refuted in the next part of the dialogue.

Dialogue 3.

And after giving everything, God declared, 'I am Rehman, I am Raheem, I will forgive all sins, but I will never forgive shirk (associating partners with Him).

This same attribute of God was instilled in men. Just as God loves His creation the most, so too does every good man love his wife dearly. He is not God, but like God, he does everything for her, or at least tries to. He even becomes *Rehman* and *Raheem* in case of her mistakes, but he will never forgive her *shirk* (infidelity). Such narratives perpetuate the belief that a woman's loyalty defines the sanctity of marriage as it is a heavenly mission, leaving little room for her desires or agency.

5.2.3 Redemption through Submissiveness

Another motif that is repeated in Zara Yaad Kar is the fact that redemption of women is conditional, depending on whether they accept the norms of society or not. The life of Mahnoor is characterized by the instances of guilt and repentance, which implies that her salvation is in her fulfilling the conventional standards of being a woman. This portrayal meets the larger social discourses that highlight the aspect of submissiveness and conformity of women as the means of personal developments with the culmination of personal and social acceptance in the final. It is clear in the dialogue that follows in episode 26 of the drama:

Dialogue 4.

Some people are as unfortunate as I am, trying to escape the torment, but it becomes their fate. Some are so unfortunate that they end their lives through suicide, making paradise forbidden for themselves and condemning themselves to the fire of hell.

5.2.4 Divine Justice vs. Patriarchal Justice

Zara Yaad Kar deftly combines the ideas of divine justice with patriarchal morality understanding. The reaction of the characters to betrayal and infidelity demonstrates the drastic difference in the justice toward men and women. The decisions that were made by Mahnoor were harshly judged as a tendency of society to make women more morally responsible. Hadi on the contrary is presented as a victim of circumstance and not a flawed person, as shown in the dialogue below where the male is given control over the administration of justice on a woman.

Dialogue 5.

'A woman is not recognized just by being a woman; she is observed to see if she also possesses dignity. And dignity comes from character, Uzma, and this dignity is something a man can clearly see.'

5.2.5 Marriage as a Divine Institution

Zara Yaad Kar depicts marriage as a holy union, male supremacy being the key to it. The role of a husband is pointed out as a provider and protector, whereas the role of a wife can be viewed as a loyal and supportive one. This image indicates the social conventions that put marriage in the divine order, in which the gender roles have been preset and are not subject to change. This theme comes out in the conversation that takes place between the female lead Mahnoor and the main lead male Hadi in episode 24.

Dialogue 6.

'Mahnoor, the way you have disrespected love and this relationship (marriage) is unacceptable in any society.'

By using theological imagery, Zara Yaad Kar elevates these traditional roles to a moral imperative, discouraging deviations from established norms.

5.2.6 Moral Responsibility and Double Standards

The way moral responsibility is handled in the drama shows the ingrained issue of the bias between men and women. The way Mahnoor has gone after Waqar is described as a serious sin, whose selfish act is justified or ignored, and that is reflected in the next line the mothers of Mahnoor say in episode 26.

Dialogue 7.

Waqar is a man, he must have realized it too. He must be thinking, 'If she couldn't be loyal to her own husband, how could she ever be loyal to me?'

Such an imbalance is a representation of societal standards that hold women more responsible with a higher moral duty and thus they can get away with such acts. These types of doublespeak further the idea that female actions are more consequential and thus worthy of investigation compared to male actions, continuing to put unequal power relations in relationships.

5.2.7 Impact of Cultural and Religious Imagery

The importance of cultural and religious imagery in Zara Yaad Kar is highly influential and capable of altering the attitudes of the audience towards gender roles since the scenes of prayer, repentance, and divine forgiveness are utilized to put the actions of the characters and their resulting consequences in perspective. Whereas conversation is symbolic of religion and arguments to give excuses to the characters

and situations. These symbols give the story moral authority, in an understated way influencing the audience that the characters are good or bad.

Dialogue 8.

One time, your father said, "Think and tell me, why does a man get married?" I genuinely started thinking. If you calculate the monthly expenses, a wife costs more than an outsider woman. Yet, a man still gets married. He spends lakhs on the wedding, fulfills his wife's desires beyond his capacity, finds a roof for her, works hard for her comfort, endures the sun, burns in the furnace of labor, and when needed, he even sells his ego or, at times, his skin for her. Do you know why? Ask me, why?

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Using faith as a tool to justify traditional gender roles, the drama reinforces societal expectations of women's behavior. This approach not only normalizes patriarchal values but also makes them seem unattainable by associating them with divine will.

5.3 Agency

5.3.1 Agency of Male Characters

In Zara Yaad Kar, the power dynamics of the story revolve around male characters, with the protagonist of the story being Hadi who is played by Zahid Ahmed and the antagonist is Waqar who is played by Ysir Mazhar. Hadi as a husband has the traditional power that men were given in a patriarchal society. He perceives love and marriage as sacrosanct and therefore, Mahnoor has betrayed him not only at the personal level but also at the social level. His moral rigidity and anger also display the way the norms of society tend to determine the reaction of the male gender, particularly that of honor and respect. Waqar, however, is the opportunistic but critical male figure. Although he goes after Mahnoor, he soon begins to agree with the social opinion, and her unfaithfulness to her husband becomes the determining factor of her personality. Yet, the male characters are not as unrestrained by society as well. As a powerful individual, Hadi struggles with several internal problems that can be viewed in the context of his weakness and emotional instability. The patriarchal privilege and the patriarchal burden of male agency in Zara Yaad Kar is therefore a privilege and a burden since the societal rules force men to conform to strict standards of morality and honor.

5.3.2 Agency of Female Characters

The play depicts the female characters as going through the societal restrictions with a certain level of compliance, non-compliance and compromise. Mahnoor, the main female character, defies conventional rules where she puts her wishes first before the society. Her agency is seen through her choice of having a relationship outside her marriage even after understanding the repercussions of such an act in a patriarchal society. Nevertheless, the claim of independence has a very high price as the story exposes her to harsh criticism and ultimate alienation. In comparison, the mother of Hadi is more traditional with the role of a woman who reconciles and supports the family values. To some extent, she supports her son, but she is trying to make a broken family stable, which shows that older female characters tend to reconcile orthodox morals with empathy. The image of women in Zara Yaad Kar becomes a dual, thus criticizing the specified spaces of female autonomy with some degree of success in a strictly patriarchal community.

5.3.3 Intersection of Agency and Conflict

The plot of *Zara Yaad Kar* is motivated by the conflicts that occur because of characters exercising or being deprived agency (Badar 2016). The fact that Mahnoor decides to abandon her marriage causes a strife not only between her and Hadi but also in the broader group of people and this portrays the way personal choices interfere with societal peace. The way he tries to balance his love to Mahnoor and the betrayal that Mahnoor commits demonstrates Hadi emotional conflict which is usually the ordination of moral dilemma in patriarchal arrangements. The character of Waqar also brings in some more complexity since his courtship of Mahnoor goes against his assessment of her personality, which shows the contradictions of the male views on loyalty and morality. These battles have a substantial impact on the path of the characters restricting or redefining their agency. As an example, the fact that Hadi eventually chooses placing agency back can be viewed as a reestablishment of agency, and the failure of Mahnoor as a reestablishment of agency as something that would alienate society, which the play has contributed to significantly.

5.3.4 Impact of Agency on Themes

The description of agency in *Zara Yaad Kar* is closely connected with other ideas of the play, love, morality and expectations of the society. The ideality of the love Mahnoor breaks is a challenge to the traditional rules and norms, and as such, the aspect of love is introduced as a complicated mixture of the desires of the person and the judgment of the whole society. Her experience underscores the fact that moral vices, especially those committed by women are enhanced in patriarchal societies, which supports the gendered concept of morality. The theme of emotional development and the importance of male honor in the society have to do with the problem of forgiveness that had to be overcome by Hadi and his final solution. Though the story criticizes some of these strictities, it mostly proclaims the status quo by using the independence of Mahnoor to warn other women of the same approach to societal disapproval, which in turn will cause them to fail. The play, therefore, is a commentary of the power structures of society, albeit indirectly with the play suggesting the unfairness of the structure, leaving the viewer to be able to deduce whether change is possible or whether the structures are too strong to be moved.

5.4 Drama Serial Parsa

5.4.1 Deconstructing the Drama's Plot and Character Dynamics

5.4.1.1 Understanding the Power Dynamics and Character Relationships

Power relations influence relationships in any drama, as they are the key to the plot development and thus, the relations establish who is in authority and who is in the obedience, providing some pretexts to conflicts. In *Parsa*, the male characters usually control the decision making process whereas the female characters are supposed to follow the male characters as the Pakistani society dictate that men are the providers and women are the caretakers. The power balance is distorted in the drama story, as *Parsa* is influenced to make life choices by her father at first and by her husband afterwards, in which women never have a chance to choose, to control their own lives. This imbalance is employed by the drama to create tension and define struggles of the characters.

5.4.1.2 The Role of Societal Norms and Expectations: A Marriage outside Religion

The society influences a lot in the way men and women are supposed to act. We find that in *Parsa*, women are less forgiven in cases of their errors. The moral failure to see is when the protagonist (also named *Parsa*) decides to marry not within her religion. This is an indication of societal demands that have held women accountable to family honor. Men in the drama, on the other hand, are forgiven or even adored in doing things in which women would be criticized. These two-sided standards are conflicting and reveal the strict standards according to which the lives of characters are organized. As an illustration, *Parsa* is condemned in the first ten episodes of the Drama in the case of marrying a man who was not in her religion, where she is under the pressure of every social being one would. However, in the 11th episode

when Parsa is pregnant with a girl, David, who is a convert to Islam so that he can marry Parsa, comes to see her and orders her to bring up their daughter as a Christian.

Dialogue 1.

David: What are you afraid of? Do you not want to marry me because of society's fear? Who are you scared of—this society?

Parsa: Why don't you understand? It's not about society, it's about religion. In our culture, a Muslim girl cannot marry a non-Muslim.

5.4.2 Contextualization of Drama Parsa

The play Parsa is placed in a cultural situation where family and religion are the key element as the society where tradition and faith play a role in every choice the main character Parsa goes through them and the play is a mirror of the societal pressure. Her dilemma of love and duty resembles the problems many women go through. The play appeals to the imagination of the readers with references to religion and the culture. In so doing, it supports the significance of societal value even in instances where they cause conflict.

5.4.2.1 Patriarchal Theodicy and Gender Roles

The drama Parsa represents patriarchal values that are tied to the norms and traditions of society. Male characters tend to have the roles of power and domination, and female characters are presented as weak and inferior. This emerges especially in the process of the Protagonist, where her behavior becomes appraised in terms of the expectations of the society (Marques, 2021). The male characters in the play are a representation of power and direction and the part played by women is associated with submission and victimization. These dynamics are a manifestation of the cultural tradition of the equality of male dominance with the will of God, supporting the traditional gender roles. An example of this is a famous scene in episode 5 of the drama which shows the grandfather of Parsa in a flashback, a case where she is in a guilt trap in marrying a boy who is a convert Muslim. It is a conversation between a child Parsa and a grandfather.

Dialogue 2.

Parsa: Why do you call me Parsa? My name is Pari, isn't it?

Grandfather: No, my dear, your name is Parsa. And Parsa means 'virtuous,' 'pure,' and 'truthful.'

Parsa: Is all of that really my name?

Grandfather: Yes, my child. These are all a part of your name, and the qualities in a name become a part of one's character. Look, you have such a beautiful name—always honor it.

(Flashback cuts to the present-day scene where Parsa, having married David, a Christian-turned-Muslim, without her family's consent, is crying in guilt.)

Parsa: I don't know why, but I feel like I have deeply disappointed Grandfather....

In episode six dialogue goes:

Dialogue 2.

Parsa: My father was a devout man who prayed five times a day. How will it feel knowing that his granddaughter is a Christian?

David to Parsa: She is my daughter. She will take after me my religion will be her religion. In the religion column, Christianity will be written.

5.4.2.2 *Infidelity akin to Shirk: Redemption through Submissiveness*

In Parsa, the issue of infidelity is treated as a metaphor, just like shirk, which has dire moral consequences. This description underlines that the wrongs committed by a woman, especially in the relationships, should be compensated through the adherence to the social norms and religious constructions. According to the story, the only personal redemption women are supposed to have is to embrace and play traditional roles as in episode 8:

Dialogue 3.

*Parsa: The heart has no religion. My heart never beat this way in Salman's presence....
What is it about David? What's happening to me? What am I doing?*

Then, in episode ten, Parsa realizes that marrying outside her faith can cost a woman lifelong ostracization and disownment from her family, where this decision is made by the male head of the family, without fear of any resistance. This is evident from the dialogues of the drama when Parsa and David's marriage is exposed to the families, the mother of the male lead, the Christian hero David, comes to Parsa's house, and sides with Parsa's family. Parsa's heartbroken, angry father yells and pledges to disown her forever. Dialogue goes:

Dialogue 4.

Parsa's father: For me, Pari is dead. No one will meet her.

5.4.2.3 *Divine Justice vs. Patriarchal Justice*

Parsa discusses the conflict of divine justice and patriarchal concepts of right or wrong. The environment is rather judgmental when it comes to her life, particularly concerning marriage, which is biased against. On the contrary, male characters, who affect or manipulate her life, are not subject to much (or no) scrutiny. The play is quiet in its approach to these two sets of standards when the film highlights the human and spiritual burden on Parsa. Nevertheless, the resolution is more inclined to the defense of these prejudices as a divine justice with an amalgamation of morality and the spirit of patriarchy. Episode four, Parsa visits David at the time of his return to the hostel after having an intense argument with him, her roommate instructs her to remain loyal to his father, mother, and Fiance.

Dialogue 5.

If your parents have given you freedom, don't misuse it. Imagine how hurt and disappointed they will be if their trust is broken. And think about how much pain Salman will go through.

In Episode 11, during a flashback, Parsa, while flexing her gait, listens to her mother saying

Dialogue 6.

*Repent, girl, repent! Allah does not like arrogance—beware, or you may be humbled.
Girls look best within their limits; if they become defiant, even men do not forgive them.*

5.4.2.4 *Marriage as a Divine Institution*

The story of Parsa revolves around marriage which is a divine relationship created by religion and social acceptance. This results in conversion marriage which is a conflict (Dariyo, 2021) and represents the notion that matrimonial unions should conform to religious and cultural norms. Male characters are shown as only defenders of this institution and women should preserve its sanctity by loyalty and sacrifice. The theology of marriage in the play strengthens the sacredness of the marriage but at the same time criticizes the struggles of such people as Parsa.

Dialogue 7.

Parsa: I got trapped in this marriage, but this is no joke. Ending it now would still anger God. And on top of that, Mary... I stood against her.

5.4.2.5 Moral Responsibility and Double Standards

The play brings out serious issues of biasness in the manner in which both males and females are being responsible regarding their actions. Parsa carries with her the burden of judgment of her actions especially in her marriage yet the actions of the male characters are usually absolved or ignored. This difference is an indication of the social conventions in which women are treated worse when they go beyond the realms of conventionality. The story has an unobtrusive challenge to these prejudices but ends up concurring with the notion that women have a higher moral burden to assume.

Dialogue 8.

Parsa: God forbid, I would never have a child.

Sister: Well, your profession demands that you love children.

Parsa: I am becoming a doctor, not a nanny.

Mother: For God's sake, my dear, before becoming a doctor, it's essential to become a good human first.

Parsa: So, you're saying that unless I play with your child, I don't even deserve to be called human?

Sister: Mom, you keep scolding her; that's why she has become rude.

Mother: She has been rude from the start.

Sister: Even so, you should speak to her in a softer tone.

Mother: I get scared of her carefree attitude. Such carelessness doesn't suit girls.

5.4.3.6 Impact of Cultural and Religious Imagery

The cultural and religious imagery that is used in Parsa helps to strengthen traditional gender roles and expectations. The symbols of prayer and repentance, awakening and its spiritual meaning are the major aspects of the journey made by Parsa, as it not only frees her actions and development but also places them in a religious context. These are the elements that are employed to portray her ultimate redemption, thus making her story fit in the society. The blending of cultural and religious practices in the drama normalizes patriarchal values, portraying them as inherent and unchangeable aspects of life.

5.4.3.7 The Unforgiving Consequences of Forbidden Love

This drama reinforces the message that a cross-religious marriage is eventually a cursed step to be taken, especially if it is a step taken by a female (Wanucha & Babar, 2018). It subtly implies that it makes God unhappy and consequently ends the marriage in a bad situation. Invoking the concepts of 'Nahusat and barkat' (misfortune and blessings) in doing something that may be legal but unwanted. This makes the person lose what he has in worldly life, and also the window to divinity gets lost. It also implies that a woman's chastity and purity are compromised in the process.

The OST (Title Song) of the Drama Parsa concludes in its lyrical disposition is the clear picture of this:

"My life was dedicated to you; your shadow was within mine...

In my desires, it was only you; your face was in my eyes.

The price of my selflessness was this...

Neither did I find you, nor did I find God.

My love became my sin, my affection became my punishment.

Even after bowing in devotion, I couldn't attain your approval.

The happiness my heart longed for was never found...

In my purity, even purity itself was lost."

5.5 Agency

5.5.1 Agency of Male Characters

In the drama *Parsa*, male characters have strong control in many situations, for example, her father is shown in a relationship of benevolent sexism towards her. He supports her, but the conditionality of not challenge the moral status quo held by male expectations. His words matter more than others. It keeps putting Parsa, a female character, in a series of recurring guilt. Male characters also guide or stop female characters. David, for example, influences Parsa's thinking. He talks with confidence. His opinions are seen as important and play an important role in persuading her to challenge the status quo drawn by her father and family. Here, it can be said that Parsa's whole characterization is just obeying and embracing one man-oriented status quo after another.

5.5.2 Agency of Female Characters

Parsa's role in the drama is quite limited. Following her union with David, she relocated to a different country with him. The new place brings drastic changes to her life. Being far away from her homeland, her support network, and her traditions, she becomes less strong in many aspects. David begins to behave differently. He returns to church. He doubts Islam. Parsa is confused. She cannot do anything to stop him. What she says does not count for much. The main confrontation arises when they become parents. She wants to bring up the child as a Muslim, while David is adamant that the child will practice the father's religion. Parsa is wounded, yet she cannot persuade him otherwise and tries to keep her faith, but she is isolated. Her power is limited. She can't have the total say in her marriage, her child's religion, or even her own life in a foreign country. The play illustrates the difficulties that women face in claiming power, particularly when they are miles away from their native land.

5.5.3 Impact of Agency on Themes

The agency of Parsa narrates the themes of self-redemption, the awakening of spiritual intelligence, and the loneliness of choice in a bitter-sweet manner, thus demonstrating that the price for honesty is usually high, yet it is the only way to attain inner tranquility. Besides, the agency has brought to light issues such as social rupture, heritage betrayal, and moral anxiety. For them, Parsa's refusal is not merely an individual decision but a form of public disgrace that results in rejection and public shame.

6. CONCLUSION

The joint discussion of *Parsa* and *Zara Yaad Kar* highlights the overwhelming impact of patriarchal theology (Gamson et al., 1992) on the narration (Romaniuk and Teran, 2022) and the character relationships in Pakistani dramas. The two plays employ theological constructs and cultural norms to illustrate gender roles, relationships, and moral dilemmas to continue stereotyping instead of questioning them. The approach taken by Serene Jones serves as a critical frame that can be used to analyse these representations and how agency and context are interacting to produce character lines and thematic discourses (Jones, 1995). This belittlement of patriarchal theology highlights the weakness of such narratives in which forgiveness, justice, and moral responsibility are frozen to a greater gender extent. In *Parsa* the spiritual awakening of Parsa is represented in terms of religious practices, and it stresses on her subjection to social and theological norms. *Zara Yaad Kar* also equally uses religious metaphors to support male dominance and women loyalty. The approach taken by Jones emphasizes the fact that such imagery can be used as an instrument of control, upholding the traditional gender roles (Hunt, 2022).

Additionally, this study attempts to provide responses to the research questions by showing how Pakistani dramas incorporate theological and cultural constructs in influencing the way societies perceive the roles of gender, morality, and the capacity of individuals. Nevertheless, it also shows that there is a necessity in alternative stories, which would break the stereotypes and encourage a more sophisticated perception of human relations and social norms. Through these critiques, the future narrations can work towards a point

of establishing equilibrium between the old values and more modern views which would bring with it a more accommodating form of gender and agency within the media.

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