

# Aspirations and Class on Pakistani Screens: An Analysis of Recent Television Dramas

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## Abstract

This paper draws focus on how different social classes are represented and performed on television in Pakistani dramas. The screen texts studied and analysed in this essay are *Alif Allah aur Insaan* (dir. Aehsun Talish, 2017), *Mann Mayal* (dir. Haseeb Hassan, 2016), and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (dir. Sultana Siddiqui, 2012). All three were produced by Momina Duraid and broadcasted on HUM TV. Drawing on these three largely popular dramas that were released across the last decade, this paper analyses how the aspirations of the middle class are depicted on screen. Building on the central tenets of class analysis by Bourdieu and Maqsood, this paper explicates how one's social class depends on the accumulation of economic, social, cultural, symbolic, and linguistic capital combined. The paper also identifies and explains how class mobility is achieved or aspired to using these forms of capital. Drawing on the depictions of social class, the paper seeks to establish and explain the critiques of different social classes, the conflict that persists within and amongst them, and how these conflicts are presented on screen. It argues that in Pakistan, television is a key medium through which Pakistani audiences find their material and positional aspirations realised. The paper explores what characters in Pakistani screen texts aspire to be, and how their aspirations are inextricably tied to the desires of the populace. This paper contributes to the discourse on the representation of social classes in Pakistan's television industry and focuses on depictions of class markers, social mobility, and class conflict.

Keywords: Pakistani drama industry, class mobility, class aspiration, class conflict, social identity

This paper examines the representation of different social classes on-screen in Pakistan, and how television serves as the key medium through which the aspirations and desires of the local audience are envisioned. Drawing on three popular, highly-acclaimed HUM TV dramas that were released across the last decade—*Zindagi Gulzar Hai/Life is a Bed of Roses* (dir. Sultana Siddiqui, 2012), *Mann Mayal/Change of Heart* (dir. Haseeb Hassan, 2016), and *Alif Allah aur Insaan/Alif for God and Human* (dir. Aehsun Talish, 2017)—this paper explicates how the audience seeks and expects a mirroring of its aspirations in the way different classes are

presented on screen. I construct my argument by focusing on plot analysis and character development in these screen texts.

Class aspiration is pivotal to all three screen texts that are studied in this paper. The enduring appeal of these dramas—as evidenced by their repeat broadcasts, and overwhelming views on video streaming platforms such as YouTube and Dailymotion—proves that these dramas act as a vehicle of aspirational fantasy for the audience. Escoffery posits that people take interest in reality TV shows because they are unscripted and are designed in a way that reflects people’s social and cultural values; people take interest in watching shows on television because they seem real (259). His observation of reality TV shows can also be used for television dramas. The dramas under study here were so appealing to audiences because their portrayal of social classes does not seem fictional. Audiences could find it relatable and relevant to their own experiences and circumstances.

While social class is a defining feature of economic, political, and social facets of life, the term itself remains largely “ambiguous” and “arbitrary” (Nayab 1). Nayab writes that “the concept of ‘upper, middle and lower’ class was mainly developed in sociology in reaction to the more rigid and deterministic Marxist concept of class, but the definition remains ambiguous” (1). This essay, therefore, draws largely on Bourdieu’s idea of class, who writes that economic, social, cultural, symbolic, educational, and linguistic capital combined are used to perform social class (12). He describes how a person’s social class influences the choices they make and argues that lifestyle choices constitute social identity (76). For Bourdieu, class is emergent, and people actively construct and interpret class through the choices that they make. The Pakistani dramas that are the focus of this paper encapsulate these ideas.

### **Social Class and Performance in Pakistani Dramas**

*Zindagi Gulzar Hai* is a story about Kashaf, a girl from a lower-middle-class family. At different instances in the drama, which represent the different times in her life, Kashaf aspires for a more materially stable life. At the beginning of the drama, she is shown to live in a small house with her sisters and their mother who teaches at a government school in her neighbourhood. She aspires to get into a good university and find a job that pays her enough to support the family financially. She wants to take on the role of a man because she does not have a brother, and her father left her mother for not bearing him a son. In most Pakistani households, sons are preferred over daughters; it is widely—and falsely—believed that only a male child can carry forward the father’s legacy and take the onus of his father’s responsibilities when he is older (Zakaria). This unfortunate reality is woven into Kashaf’s early life.

As the story progresses, Kashaf’s aspirations start shifting from her visions for the future, to more material desires. When Kashaf goes to university, for example, she realizes that most people around her wear expensive clothes and shoes, travel in big cars, and come from elite households—all of these factors together contribute to her feelings of inferiority. She wants to travel in a car of her own rather than buses and taxis; she wants to live in a better house; she wants to wear better clothes; she wants to look prettier. Essentially, she wants to live the life of those belonging to higher social classes. Bourdieu explains that women feel less self-conscious about their body, speech, and beauty when they belong to the upper echelons of society (206). In the same way, Kashaf places herself under heightened scrutiny when she compares herself to

others due to her social position. As discussed below, we see similar themes emerge in *Mann Mayal* and *Alif Allah aur Insaan*.

Maqsood describes how different classes are performed in Pakistan. This includes the variance in conversation topics among different classes, the difference in localities where they live, as well as the differences in occupations that occur because of class differences (25–50). These ideas indicate that different classes hold different aspirations. Maqsood, while discussing class representation, explains that like all other forms of display, self-representation is a performative act which allows certain members representing a certain class, to speak on behalf of the entire community. In other words, self-representation allows these class members, and the audience watching them, to conjugate in a particular frame of reference (35). Social class is performed on screen in the same way it is performed in real life. Special attention is paid to the way characters who belong to different classes represent that belonging through their accents, their costumes, their living spaces, and their life goals.

Bourdieu's ideas about appearances are also relevant to such representation of class. He explains how differences in appearance are realized by symbolically accentuating certain character traits, gestures, accents, postures, and behaviours. These distinct markers of appearance are further exaggerated and used to reinforce the notions of class difference and social hegemony (192). The portrayal of wealthy classes espouses the fantasies of lower classes. Dwyer calls this phenomenon the “slum's eye view” (106). A point that merits attention here is that in order to increase their viewership, the television industry also panders to popular imagination. In that way, it does not exclusively portray class realities but also incorporates elements of how people would commonly imagine class differences.

The makers of films and television shows ensure that on screen depictions emanate not just from reality but “versions of reality” (Guthrie). Extensive research is carried out across different socioeconomic strata of society to understand audiences' consumption patterns in terms of what they are watching on television, and then content is produced accordingly (Rehman). In Pakistan, the stories that perform the best in terms of ratings revolve around domestic politics between a girl and her unscrupulous in-laws; extra-marital relationships; or even stories highlighting social problems embedded into the fabric of Pakistani society (Rehman).

The concept of performing classes also relates to indexicality. An indexical statement can loosely be defined as one whose meaning depends on its context. Lately, indexicality—a concept developed in semiotics—has come to be associated with “cinema”, “photography”, and “contemporary art” (Schofield et al., 175). In television dramas and films, dress, comportment, and language all index a person's social class. The images and stereotypes of the upper class and the working-class culture massively draw on the concept of indexicality. To give an example, in *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, Nazneen—the female protagonist and the daughter of a rich landlord—is shown to be brazen in her love for Basit. She runs away from home to marry the man she loves. This indexes negative morality; Nazneen yields to a desire that is prohibited in the Pakistani culture. In the same way, visual markers are also indexical. Rani's *jhuggi* (‘hut’), for example, is shown to be dark and dismal. The space appears congested because of tightly framed shots. This points toward her impoverished circumstances and economic deprivation, and even paints a contrast with upper classes that live in colourful *havelis* (‘mansions’) in villages; or modern, urban homes in the city.

In these dramas, the upper class is shown to be bilingual, communicating in English and Urdu, especially if they live in the city. Switching between English and Urdu is a common feature of language for upper class, urban Pakistanis. The depiction of this is reminiscent of Dwyer's ideas on language in Indian cinema—the same phenomenon holds for the Pakistani television industry too. Dwyer says that this switch occurs between “words”, “phrases”, “sentences”, or “just changing languages several times during a conversation” (85). The use of certain expressions such as “whatever” and “like” is becoming increasingly commonplace (86). This even explains the use of thank you in place of *shukriya* (‘thank you’), or sorry in place of *maazrat* (‘sorry’). In Bordieusian theory, “the truth of the interaction is never entirely constrained in the interaction”; words mean more than just their explicit meanings (Myles 891).

Zaroon from *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* is a character that exemplifies this idea. He is the male protagonist in the drama, who belongs to an upper-class family, and calls his father “Dad”, while Kashaf, who belongs to a lower-middle class family, calls her father “*Abba*” (‘father’). These subtle differences are markers of class. Lower classes, in contrast, speak in a Punjabi accent, especially if they live in a village. In these dramas, poverty mostly lies outside of metropolitan cities. Rani, beggar, and Shamu, a transgender character from *Alif Allah aur Insaan* serve as examples in this context. They both live in a village in abject poverty and speak Urdu with a Punjabi accent. When Rani's social status is raised later in the drama, she loses her Punjabi accent completely. However, Shamu's accent remains the same till the end even after he moves to the city and secures a job in a high-end beauty parlour which is a rare exception. Despite English being one of the official languages of Pakistan, only a specific class has access to English-medium education and can understand and speak English fluently. When characters on screen are seen conversing in English, it indexes their socio-economic status. Similarly, when characters converse in broken English or a regional accent—it indexes their class background and economic circumstances.

### **Class Mobility, Marriage, and Caste**

Class mobility is the desired end of class aspiration. Contrary to the reality, class mobility is usually depicted as very easy to achieve in Pakistani television dramas. There are numerous examples of the poor establishing big businesses or achieving mobility through marriage. Television dramas often portray characters who want to transcend their socio-economic status; these characters are seen embarking on paths out of poverty and out earning their parents. In reality, however, climbing the economic ladder to achieve a socio-economic status change is remarkably hard. This is particularly true in Pakistan's case where the socio-economic status of the father mainly decides the socio-economic positions of his children (Javed). People can succeed in their individual socio-economic stratum, but they rarely move into another. Most people will live their entire lives in the same economic class that they were born into, and this pattern is seen lasting across generations (Giddens and Sutton 296).

One such television drama which depicts class mobility on screen is *Alif Allah aur Insaan*. Its plot is based on inter-class interaction with a particular focus on lower classes overcoming class divisions and achieving a higher socio-economic status. In *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, several story threads demonstrate the phenomenon of upward mobility. Rani, a beggar who lives in a small shack aspires to be like Nigar Begum, a *tawaif* (‘courtesan’). When Rani sees Nigar Begum for the first time on a roadside—enamored by her beauty, glamour, and high economic status—she

follows her all the way to the brothel where Nigar Begum lives. Eventually, Rani becomes a tawaif and earns large sums of money. Later, she even lands a role in a film with a well-known director. That does not necessarily mean that she achieves a better social status, but her financial circumstances improve significantly. However, being a courtesan is widely perceived as an immoral and irreligious profession in Pakistan, which translates into the way it is projected on the screen. By the time Rani becomes a successful tawaif and starts earning sufficient income, she loses all connection with her family, and society looks at her with disapproval and revulsion. When she buys an apartment in the city, her neighbours cut off all ties with her and disparage her for being a tawaif. She keeps moving from one place to another to try to settle down, but she is met with derision and repulsion every time. Because of the rejection from her family and her neighbours, she finally gives up and takes her own life. This depicts how social mobility comes at a huge cost in Pakistan when the structural means to achieve it, such as education, are not available, and other avenues are used to attain it.

In the same drama, Shamu—a transgender character—aspires to leave behind his profession of singing and dancing and wants to have a more respected career. He finds work at a small parlour in his village, and from there, moves to the city to work at a bigger, well-known parlor. He keeps climbing the economic ladder then. His work also earns him a lot of prestige, fame, and social status. His social life revolves around other famous and rich people—mostly actresses and other female clients from elite households—who come to him to avail his services. In the case of both these characters, Shamu and Rani, we see that from living in small shacks, they move into increasingly lavish apartments and houses, which are bigger, more spacious, and laden with furniture.

There is a similar emphasis on class mobility in the television series *Mann Mayal*. Salahuddin—Manahil’s teacher and neighbour, and the man she falls in love with—aspires to achieve class mobility when he shifts from his village to the city to work at his friend’s firm. In the city, he becomes remarkably successful and eclipses his parents financially. He gets a place of his own, hires a domestic helper, and becomes one of the city’s elites. Contrasting this with Rani’s example from *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, it can be clearly inferred that class is made up of both financial and social capital. Even though Rani achieved financial stability in her life, she could never attain her desired social status. Salahuddin succeeded in the way that he later belonged to the upper echelons of society, Rani’s aspiration for social mobility was not achieved despite the improvement in her financial circumstances.

Another point worth noting here is that in most cases, only upward mobility is presented in Pakistani dramas. The characters of Kashaf, Rani, Shamu, and Salahuddin illustrate this idea. Downward mobility is less commonly depicted on screen. Another common pattern is that for most characters in these dramas, upward class mobility also means relocating from underdeveloped, rural settings, to modern urban spaces in other cities or sometimes even in the same city—as in the case of Kashaf in *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*. Gomes provides insights that help in understanding how migration and identity are interlinked; when people have economic and social aspirations, they tend to move away and settle down in places away from their home city or country (91). Hence, when the characters’ socio-economic identity changes, most of the time, their living space does too. This also highlights how audiences’ aspirations, such as of moving into better living conditions, are realized in these shows.

In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* as well, class mobility emerges as a prominent idea. Kashaf leaves her lower-middle-class household after she becomes a successful CSS officer and gets married to Zaroon, a classmate of hers from university who belongs to an upper-class family. Her social and economic status is raised after her marriage to Zaroon. The institution of marriage can deepen or blur the lines of socio-economic divisions. Popular imaginations of marriage translate into the storylines and characterizations within TV shows. There is a narrative focus on how “patriarchal hegemony” is internalised such that women belonging to middle-class backgrounds are constantly pressured to marry (Bell et al., 129). In Pakistan however, the same holds for all classes. The idea that girls need to get married at the right age, right time, into a family that is of a higher social status is woven into the narrative of all three dramas.

In *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, for example, Nazneen, the female protagonist and the daughter of a rich landlord, is married to Shahzeb who is a landlord and a prominent, revered, and respected personality in his village even though she did not want to marry him. She was forced to marry Shahzeb because her parents thought he was the perfect match for her based on his wealthy background and social standing in the village. Instead, she wanted to marry Basit—the son of a *mazara* (‘bonded laborer’) and her domestic helper. As the story progresses, Nazneen divorces Shahzeb and marries Basit, but her relationship is shown to only work with Basit when he becomes financially stable towards the end of the drama. Despite her desire to be with Basit, the drama strongly implies that economic security plays a significant role in ensuring that a relationship is successful. Secondly, since Basit is from the working class and possesses a lower social status, this also shows the unwillingness of upper classes to establish ties with their domestic help or lower classes generally. Other characters like Nigar Begum and Rani—later known as Rina Begum—also have similar expectations from marriage. They expect it would grant them better social and economic status.

In *Mann Mayal*, Manahil is married to Mikaeel. He lives in Karachi, belongs to an upper-class family, and lives an elite lifestyle. Manahil’s parents do not let Manahil marry Salahuddin—her best friend’s brother who later moves to the city and becomes very successful—because they decide that he is not a suitable match for her; he lives in a smaller house in a village, earns little money, and does not have the same social status as Mikaeel. In sum, all men that the female protagonists marry in these dramas are rich, good-looking, live in big houses, own big cars, and possess a better social status than the girls that they get married to. Hence, when Kashaf’s mother reprimands her for her repulsion to marriage, her emphasis on a husband, home, and children, depicts the ultimate aspiration for women of all social classes in these dramas.

In this discussion, the idea of caste is also relevant. The caste system is the longest surviving system of social stratification; a “hierarchy” of endogamous groups that is ascribed to people at birth (Olcott 648). Olcott especially draws attention to the fact that a class differs from a clan or social class in being endogamous (648). He describes how a person’s socio-economic status is determined by their caste (649). If a contrast is drawn between Pakistani and Indian dramas—it becomes apparent that in Pakistani dramas, the facet of caste from a marriage relationship is conspicuously absent. Mankekar explains how the upper-caste and lower-caste identities are negotiated in the space of Indian television. With a few exceptions, lower-caste characters usually evince unfaltering devotion and loyalty toward their upper-caste rulers (202). And in addition, lower castes are also portrayed as “primitive”, in stark contrast to the “civilized” and “learned” Kshatriyas and Brahmans (202). These casteist ideas dominate the landscape of Indian television and film. In Indian shows, many important family names such as Kapoor, Chopra,

Malhotra, Khanna—names that represent higher castes—are repeatedly heard and referred to (Dwyer 97). In sharp contrast, in Pakistani dramas, this element is by and large missing. It appears that class serves as a stand-in for caste in these dramas, and even generally in other Pakistani dramas.

It is a misnomer that these casteist ideas only pervade Indian society. In the November 1957 Presidential ordinance of Pakistan, almost 32 castes are listed as “scheduled castes” (Patel). Prominent examples include Meghwars, Bheels, Kolhis, and Baghris (Patel). In Pakistan, caste dismissal is commonplace because of the Muslim belief that caste does not have a place in our society and is not condoned by the Quran (Patel). But even then, in Pakistan, caste influences the choices that people make—including in their romantic and marriage relationships. According to a study conducted at a university in Lahore, all students that were interviewed were aware of their caste background, and caste played a deep-seated and active role in their lives (Patel). This shows that even though caste has a prominent position in the lives of common people in Pakistan, it is not depicted on screen in the same way. The landscape of the Pakistani drama industry is overwhelmingly dominated by classist ideas instead of casteist ideas.

### **A Critique of Upper Classes**

Class conflict is another important dimension of socio-economic classes and aspirations within those classes. In all the screen texts under analysis in this paper, there is an evident critique of the upper classes. Escoffery contends that sometimes the portrayal of different characters on screen is detached from reality. He writes that “television, as a fictional, contrived world, could not, by its very nature, be real. Viewers are caught between what ‘is’ and what ‘could be’” (182). It can be argued then, that the presentation of different classes on screen is not an exact replication of reality. While audiences may find certain depictions that they could relate to, the complexities of their lives and emotions simply cannot be mirrored on screen.

Although the upper classes in Pakistani dramas are shown to represent the desires and aspirations of common people, they are also critiqued on their lifestyles, attitudes, and exploitation of the lower classes. It is clear from the screen texts under study that despite their material wealth and financial security, upper classes have their own problems. These range from being discontent with their family life to being morally suspect; being amoral, indecent, and irreligious. In this context, Maqsood’s discussion on modernity and piety is quite relevant. She says that the middle class has certain aspirations about modernity and piety; the group of people belonging to this class wants to be upwardly mobile, dominate urban life, be well versed in western culture and language, yet it also aspires to reach the ideals of piety and is visibly more religious (2). The concepts of modernity, piety and social class come together in the screen texts that I am focusing on in this paper.

Maqsood argues that while people may have certain “modern” aspirations in terms of their clothing preferences, place of residence, schooling, the language that they speak, and social interactions, they want to achieve these aspirations while participating in the larger culture of “religious consumption” (8). Maqsood emphasizes on middle class groups constructing themselves as *khandani* (‘family-oriented’), but this assumption holds for most other classes too (9). For example, a large number of women wear a headscarf or a veil, while men keep beards (8). These middle-class groups try to differentiate themselves from other class groups by drawing

out new markers of class divisions along the shadowy lines of religiosity and piety. Such markers lend a sense of moral and religious superiority to those belonging to this sub-section of the society.

In the screen texts being discussed however, mostly the lower classes are shown to possess this kind of involvement in religious life and they are also depicted as morally superior and virtuous. For example, in *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, Kashaf and her sisters wear seemingly modest clothes and cover their heads with a scarf, and it is implied that they are khandani. In contrast, Kashaf's class fellows at university wear western clothes and a lot of makeup. The drama depicts Kashaf as a morally upright person despite belonging to a lower middle-class household. On the opposite hand, her friends at university belonging to rich households are depicted as morally bankrupt. These small facets of class distinction such as clothing choices, appeal to the Muslim identity. Even though there are widespread concerns regarding progress and class mobility, they are threaded into the larger context of religious identity and piety. Hence, a person's participation in religious life and piety are also presented as differentiators of their class background.

It is repeatedly shown and established in the screen texts that wealthy classes present a paradox. Materially they have everything, yet they have their own problems. In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, this becomes visible at several points. In the initial episodes, Zaroon is shown to have a strained relationship with his mother. She focuses all her attention on her work and neglects her children. This is a critique of working women; although there has been progress over the years, Pakistan's society is largely disapproving of working women. Thus, Zaroon's mother being a professional is shown to have a profound impact on her relationship with her children who feel distant from her. Similarly, Zaroon's sister Sarah's revealing, fitted clothes are also presented as a problem specific to her socio-economic class. Kashaf, in glaring contrast, is always fully wrapped up in her *chadar* ('shawl'). In Pakistan's patriarchal society, girls' clothes are commonly attributed to their morality and modesty. The narrative that pervades the Pakistani society is that decent girls do not wear revealing clothes. This also explains the repeated critique of Sarah's seemingly fitted, revealing clothes by her father and brother in the drama.

There is a similar trend in *Mann Mayal*, wherein Manahil's upper-class husband is involved in gambling, drinking, and womanizing. He comes home late every day, neglects his family and is discourteous to his parents. All his flaws are ascribed to his social and economic status. In contrast, Salahuddin—who belongs to a lower-middle class family—is shown to be very humble, down to earth, honest, and caring, even when he becomes rich. Salahuddin's case can also be compared with Shamu from *Alif Allah aur Insaan* and Kashaf from *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*. All three of them retain their values and morals despite progressing into a higher class. This suggests that those who achieve upward class mobility remember the values that they were raised with while those born elite usually lack those values in the first place. Mikael from *Mann Mayal* and Zaroon from *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* are cases in point.

Similarly, in *Alif Allah aur Insaan* as well, certain facets of upper-class life are critiqued. Shahzeb, for example, is a pious and religious man, yet he still visits a brothel with his friends, emphasizing that rich classes are morally and religiously corrupt in spite of their outward displays of morality and religiosity. Nazneen is shown to be stubborn, insolent, and disrespectful toward her parents. She looks disdainfully at people belonging to the lower ends of the class spectrum. Again, her behaviour is ascribed to her socio-economic class. At various points in the drama, she is shown to misbehave with her domestic help with impunity and without any

consequences. As she is the daughter of a rich and powerful landlord, it is implied that she can get away with anything. She also defies her parents and secretly marries Basit. In Pakistan, there is great emphasis on a woman's honour. When Nazneen brazenly marries the man she loves, her parents feel distraught and cut off ties with her. Nazneen's trajectory implies that by making an independent decision against her parents' wishes, she violated her and her family's honour. In their rage, Nazneen's parents lose all sense of their morality and kill Basit's parents. Basit is not around at the time, but if he were, they would have killed him too. They do not believe Basit's parents when they say Nazneen does not live with them and murder them in cold blood. This depicts that when rich people have power, they can misuse it for their personal agendas. Hence, the critique of the upper class, depicted as morally bankrupt, is a conspicuous theme that manifests repeatedly.

### Articulations of Social Class

Lastly, another facet that comes to the fore in these screen texts is the way certain classes talk about other classes, and how that translates into these shows. While people do not tend to indicate their own class placement directly, for instance by claiming I belong to the upper class or the lower class, it is voiced in the way they speak of themselves in relation to their position with other classes, or in the way they comment on social markers of class. In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, Zaroon—who belongs to an upper-class household—says while talking about Kashaf when he first meets her, “*Na presentation, na baat karnay ki tameez, na koi class*” (‘She does not have any sense of presentation, no manners in speaking, no class’). On the other hand, Kashaf—who belongs to a lower-middle class family—while talking about her university fellows says, “*Mein un kay saath kya muqabla karoon?*” (‘How can I compete with them?’). What she means is that she cannot compete with them in her looks, clothes, and her overall appearance because they are rich, and can afford better things.

Similarly, in a scene in *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, Samina—Nazneen's domestic helper—calls Nazneen “*chalaak, hoshiyar, aur ziddi*” (‘cunning, sharp, and stubborn’), when she realizes that Nazneen has fallen in love with her brother, Basit. Here we see that she feels disdain for Nazneen and blames her alone for the affair and not her brother. Her contemptuous remarks suggest that Nazneen is spoiled and lacks a conscience because she belongs to a family with a higher social status. Her statement indexes a critique of Nazneen's social and economic status. She does not directly say that because Nazneen is rich, she exploits her domestic help to her benefit but implies it for the viewers to understand. Again, the element of the critique of the upper-class unfolds here. Yet at the same time, it also appears that the working class realises that its place is to provide support to the upper classes (Guthrie). In *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, Samina's father admonishes her for speaking so rudely about Nazneen and says, “*woh maalik hain humaray, hum un kay jootay uthanay walay naukar hain*” (‘They are our masters, we pick up their shoes as their servants’). This statement clearly illustrates that the working class understands its position on the class spectrum in relation to higher classes. Even in *Mann Mayal*, Salahuddin's family addresses Manahil's family as “*baray log*” (‘important people’). When Salahuddin asks his mother to take his proposal to Manahil's house, she outrightly refuses him saying that Manahil's family would not even spit on them given their financially strained circumstances. Manahil's family, on the other hand, thinks that Salahuddin only wants to marry her because of her money. Her aunt, in reference to Salahuddin's interest in Manahil, says,

“*Paisay nikaalnay ka acha tareeka nikaala hai*” (‘He has found a good way of making money’). These are just a few examples that demonstrate how language plays a part in solidifying class lines in these dramas and how class identities are shaped up by the way people articulate their positions.

In conclusion, the three dramas—*Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, *Mann Mayal*, and *Alif Allah aur Insaan*—depict common people’s aspirations and imaginations of different social classes. These are highlighted through the specifics such as appearance, costumes, language, accents, and living spaces. All these different elements that distinguish one class from another come together in these dramas as visual depictions of the audiences’ class aspirations. These dramas also commonly depict characters attaining upward social mobility which is extremely difficult to achieve in reality. They put forth the idea that if people are determined and work hard, they can cross class lines and enter a higher class. The characters of Kashaf, Shamu, and Salahuddin achieve social mobility and out-earn their parents within a span of a few years, which is in glaring contrast to what ordinary people experience in their life. Mostly people tend to last in their parents’ class for several generations. Lastly, even though the upper classes in these dramas represent aspirational fantasies of the people watching, they are also critiqued based on their attitudes, lifestyles, and amorality. The lower classes are depicted as virtuous and pious, while the upper class are depicted as rude, irreligious, and morally inadequate. The class critique thus depicts a mixed attitude in which upward social mobility is desirable so long as it clings to the morality commonly associated with those from humbler backgrounds.

## Film Synopses

### *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*

*Zindagi Gulzar Hai* is the story of Kashaf Murtaza and Zaroon Junaid. Kashaf belongs to a lower-middle-class family, while Zaroon belongs to an elite family. Kashaf lives with her mother, who works at a government school, and two sisters in a small house. Her father abandoned her mother years ago because she could not bear him a son. He married another woman instead and had a son from his second marriage. Kashaf and her family had to face difficulties all their lives because of her father.

Kashaf secures admission in a prestigious university on a scholarship. At the university, she meets Zaroon. Initially, Zaroon only wanted to befriend Kashaf to hurt and defame her. Kashaf finds out about this and feels repelled by him. Later however, after Zaroon’s engagement to his best friend Asmara falls apart, and his sister’s marriage comes to an end, he feels increasingly drawn toward Kashaf and wishes to marry her.

As the story proceeds, Zaroon and Kashaf become government officers. They meet at work and Zaroon tries to reconcile his differences with Kashaf, but Kashaf gives him a cold shoulder. Kashaf believes that he is still flirty, arrogant, and insincere like he was at university. Zaroon then turns to his former teacher who is a mentor to Kashaf and confides in him about his feelings for Kashaf. Kashaf rejects Zaroon’s marriage proposal the first time but later, she accepts and marries Zaroon. In the end, they have twin daughters and live happily ever after.

*Mann Mayal*

*Mann Mayal* is about a girl named Manahil who lives in a joint family in a small town. She falls in love with her neighbour and teacher Salahuddin. Manahil and Salahuddin do not get married because Salahuddin's social and economic status does not match Manahil's. Instead, Manahil's parents marry her off to Mikaeel, a rich but irascible and bitter person. Mikaeel mistreats Manahil. He is abusive, shows little interest in Manahil, gambles, and comes home late every night.

Salahuddin goes to Karachi to work at his friend Ifti's firm. In Karachi, he meets Ifti's father Rehman and starts taking care of him because his daughter-in-law and domestic helper do not look after him. Later when Rehman dies, he leaves his property to Salahuddin. Salahuddin uses that money to establish a big business empire. He is successful in his venture within a year. Later, Salahuddin employs a new worker named Jeena. She falls in love with Salahuddin and takes care of him despite being repeatedly brushed off.

After some time, Salahuddin's and Manahil's paths cross and Salahuddin realizes the misery she is in. He falls deeply in love with her again despite Jeena's repeated attempts to make him fall in love with her. This time Manahil rejects him, and he realizes the mistake he made all those years ago of letting Manahil go with Mikaeel.

*Alif Allah aur Insaan*

*Alif Allah aur Insaan* has several story lines running simultaneously. Shahzeb is a rich landlord who falls in love with Nazneen at his friend's wedding (who got married to Nazneen's sister). At the same wedding, Nazneen insults Shamu and his clan of transgenders for dancing at the wedding. Shamu curses her and says that she will lose everything one day. Eventually, that does happen and Nazneen suffers because of her arrogance and stubbornness.

Rani is a beggar who sees Nigar Begum—a *tawaif*—at the roadside one day and follows her to the brothel where Nigar Begum lives. Rani wants to be like Nigar Begum because of her beauty and wealth. Rani heads over to the brothel and meets with Nigar Begum. She asks her to keep her as her helper. Nigar Begum invites Rani to stay and changes her name to Rina Begum.

It is slowly revealed in how that Shahzeb once visited the brothel with his friends and saw Nigar Begum perform there. Nigar Begum fell in love with him then. When she professed her love to him, he turned her away. Nigar Begum cursed him and said that may he be rejected the same way one day.

Shahzeb proposes marriage to Nazneen, but Nazneen is not interested in marrying him. She wants to marry Basit who is the son of her domestic helper. She falls in love with Basit when she moves to the city to finish college and where her father appoints Basit to take care of her. Eventually, Shahzeb divorces Nazneen when he finds out about her love affair with Basit.

Shamu becomes a successful beautician and starts earning good money. Rani's situation worsens and despite seeing a few highs as a *tawaif*, she later falls into the life of misery and takes her own life.

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### **Filmography**

*Alif Allah aur Insaan/Alif for God and Human* (dir. Aehsun Talish, 2017)

*Mann Mayal/Change of Heart* (dir. Haseeb Hassan, 2016)

*Zindagi Gulzar Hai/Life is a Bed of Roses* (dir. Sultana Siddiqui, 2012)