

# Negotiating Morality in Pakistani Dramas

Mahnoor Ghani Sardar

## Abstract

This essay seeks to explore the nature of Pakistani television dramas and their role in shaping the discourse around gender, morality, sexuality in the context of the rise of media in general and new media in particular (social media). It focuses particularly on the blockbuster *Meray Paas Tum Ho/I Have You* (dir. Nadeem Baig 2019), penned by Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar, due to its recent success and massive popularity across the country. With the proliferation of television dramas addressing a diverse range of social issues, dramas can be agents of social change. This essay adopts an exploratory, paratextual perspective to argue that dramas in Pakistan open avenues for a more complex interaction of various social groups, including actors, drama-makers and audience, who negotiate and navigate their ways through questions of gender, morality and sexuality. This interaction is also shaped by media platforms and online interactions among different social groups which concretize and frame their reception of these dramas.

Keywords: Gender and Drama, Gender and Morality, Paratextual Analysis, Audience reception, *Meray Paas Tum Ho*

## Preface

I vividly remember a telephone conversation with my friend in which she was adamant to convince me why *Meray Paas Tum Ho (MPTH)/I Have You* (dir. Nadeem Baig, 2019) was worth watching: it “raised the bar for men”, particularly men who caught their wives/partners cheating on them. I was suddenly intrigued about the phenomenon, *MPTH*, given that everyone around me was jumping on the *MPTH* bandwagon. I binge-watched the first few episodes which had already been run, and within a few days caught up with the fresh ones. Suddenly, the memes circulating on Twitter and Facebook began to make sense and I could make informed opinions about the memes and social media posts. I could also make sense of the insights that my friends, acquaintances or even strangers exchanged about the drama. I had too many questions—for the writer, for the men and women on Twitter, and for my own friends and family who would openly comment on the plot, the drama, and the memes in casual settings. Gradually, with the ending of *MPTH*, I wanted to engage with multiple layers of subtexts that it surrounded.

Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar, the author of this drama, had been enjoying generous airtime on morning shows, news channels, and in online interviews during the run of the show. He had divided social media and his viewers on what came to be known as his ‘sermons’ on morality, in which he elaborated on his notions of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ woman prototypical dichotomy.

Many lauded him for his “intellectual genius” whereas others called him out on his misogynistic and problematic views. Some labeled him as an ‘extraordinary’ playwright, who had mastered the art of weaving human emotion into poetry or prose. Qamar later engaged in an explosive argument with activist Marvi Sirmed on national television because, according to Qamar, she fit the “bad woman” trope and therefore did not deserve *izzat* (‘respect,’ ‘honor’). He hurled verbal abuses at her which aired uncensored on national television. Qamar was not stopped from speaking by the production team, and rather given extensive airtime by the host of the show. This video exploded on social media and Qamar was consequently repeatedly summoned for follow-up interviews in order to seek clarifications regarding his behavior.

Even after *MPTH* ended, its audience engagement continued, and it had a lasting impact on the television landscape in Pakistan. The cheating trope has repeatedly and more frequently than before, been brought up in dramas in various different forms, such as in one a story where a girl marries her brother-in-law after an extramarital affair with him in *Jalan/Jealousy* (dir. Aabis Raza 2020), a girl who marries her best friend’s fiancé after an extramarital affair in *Qurbatain/Proximity* (dir. Kamran Akbar Khan 2020) and yet again, the woman ends up alone, punished for being a liar, manipulator and greedy. The male protagonist, on the other hand, is forgiven by his wife and they are given a happy ending. Similarly, in *Khwaab Nagar ki Shehzadi/Princess of the Dream City* (dir. Syed Ramish Rizvi 2021) shows an extramarital affair between the male protagonist and his hired female domestic housekeeper.

These are a handful of examples, however, and the scope of conversation around taboo subjects has also broadened with the introduction of a new medium in Pakistan, that is the digital web series with a greater degree of creative liberties from the national censor board. In the summer of 2020, a one-of-a-kind Pakistani web series titled *Churails/Witches* (dir. Asim Abbasi 2020) was released. Among many other taboo subjects that its plot boldly addressed, it started off with the premise that problematized adulterous men whose actions have been normalized by patriarchal societies for too long and pressed for their accountability. The show and its cast members claimed that it was a series made to celebrate agentive female characters, as well as feminism—something that is difficult on mainstream television. The show seemed to be a response to the narrative put forth and normalized by *MPTH* and other similar dramas on mainstream television as evident from its timing and premise. This also shows that texts also interact with, and even confront each other, in their narratives and conversations, and this intertextuality contributes to the discourses surrounding them.

## Introduction

This paper takes a paratextual approach to understand how a drama extends beyond its text and its meaning is constantly negotiated by audiences. The pioneer of paratextual research, Gerard Genette principally divided paratext into two categories of peritext and epitext. Paratexts, broadly, are media and texts that surround a book or a film and could be further extended to any other literary genre (qtd. in Klecker 402). His definition primarily explored texts both inside and outside a book that are not part of the main narrative of the text but still develop as its derivative. Within that definition, epitexts constitute interviews, critic reviews, and so on. Peritexts, on the other hand, entail elements contained within the book, albeit outside its main text. These could

include the preface, footnotes, author's note et cetera. Based on this classification, the paper will concern itself with the way that the audience interacts with the epitexts of *MPTH*.

In the case of a film, or perhaps any other visual medium, the distinction between text and paratext is vague. Dialogues are part of the text of the film, whereas subtitles (in different languages) qualify as peritexts. The theme song or an Original Soundtrack (OST) also merges into the text of the drama or film when it plays as diegetic music. However, if it plays with the ending credits or the title track, OSTs classify as epitexts.

Drawing on Genette's peritext-epitext dichotomy, epitexts are more relevant for the case of *Meray Paas Tum Ho* (qtd. in Klecker 402). Epitexts of *MPTH* involve, but are not limited to, interviews by the cast and crew members, its author, trailers of its episodes and the social media discourse surrounding the drama. Author interviews rarely ever take a front seat in television shows or film promotions, where the focus is usually on actors due to their strong fan following. Occasionally though, famous directors or writers may enjoy the spotlight.

In the Pakistani television drama industry, authors, and scriptwriters (many of whom are female) enjoy prominence and popularity. Writers such as Farhat Ishtiaq and Umera Ahmad are household names. However, the popularity Qamar garnered during *MPTH* promotions, despite being a male writer, is still unprecedented in the Pakistani television landscape, and therefore relevant to the study of the paratexts of *MPTH*. Qamar has scripted several other films and dramas, such as *Pyarey Afzal/Dear Afzal* (dir. Nadeem Baig 2013), *Zara Yaad Kar/Just Remember* (dir. Amna Nawaz Khan 2016) and *Sadqay Tumhare/May My Years Be Added To Yours* (dir. Mohammed Ehteshamuddin 2014), to name a few but he shot to popularity when *MPTH* aired. While the episodes of *MPTH* ran on television, he was frequently invited to morning shows, news channel interviews and even web interviews. His controversial statements regarding the status of women in society frequently caught media attention and fed into his increasing popularity as he would be summoned for more interviews which probed for further explanations or clarifications regarding previous controversial statements. Such statements can be termed as foundational paratexts supplementing the viewership experience of *MPTH*.

Paratexts are, therefore, crucial to the study of popular culture, and literary works need to be studied in relation to the complex interactions between their creators, audiences, fanbase and wider masses as all of these are relevant stakeholders in narrative formation. Viewers are simultaneously able to generate reactions to dialogues of the drama, interact with each other and even its cast and crew members to form a complex web of paratextual information. Stuart Hall expounded at greater length on this view in his seminal essay, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular". He argues that a film, book or a television show shares an interlocked relationship between what is represented, and how it is perceived. Hall rejects the idea that popular culture consumers (audiences) are merely "cultural dopes" (qtd in Duncombe 186) or passive audiences. He contends that they actively perceive and process cultural information in often complex, multi-directional ways against the backdrop of authorial intention which is reflected in the organization of a particular text, and diverse interpretations of fellow audience groups. As a consequence, this paper explores the ways audiences generate, interact with, and react to the paratextual information provided to them and then zooms in on the case of *MPTH*.

The Pakistani television audience is a diverse group, with a melange of views and insights coming together about its content. They are divided in their opinions about whether these dramas are worth watching. Sabahat Zakariya, for instance, unpacks some of the most common tropes in

these dramas which include stereotypes of a good women versus bad women and romanticization of women's suffering ("Feminustani Decodes Pakistani Drama"). Many others echo these concerns. However, Pakistani dramas are also increasingly lauded by viewers for bringing social issues to light through issue-based storytelling. Hall argues that audiences are neither "blank screens" where cultural information can plainly be imprinted or fed, nor do they possess complete agency in determining who is represented, when, where, and how. He terms it as a constant struggle where narratives are constantly "throned and de-throned" (qtd. in Duncombe 187) and some groups win while others lose in a constant tug of war. It is an ideological battlefield without "once-and-for-all victors" (187). There are competing narratives, moments of domination as well as subversion for various actors.

In case of Pakistani audiences, for instance, social media commentary on the drama and interviews of cast and/or crew supplement the perception process of the main text of the drama. The ways certain characters are represented (or intentionally erased) seeps deep in their cultural memories with substantive implications. Some people, for instance, relate with the treatment or representation of a certain character while others could despise the same. In other cases, characters are explicitly created and portrayed in hues of black and white and stark contrast to one another, for audiences to contextualize them in a certain light. Audience interpretation of the content of a drama still takes place in more nuanced and layered ways where actors, playwrights, or directors are capable of adding their own voices (and interpretation) to varying degrees. This allows for alignment of meanings audiences derive from characters and stories by narrowing them down to what the authors or directors intend to transmit to the audiences.

## Literature Review

Various scholars have expanded on Genette's notion of paratexts and have illustrated the functions of paratextual elements in media such as television and film. Some have focused on the role of paratexts as organizational and marketing tools (Klecker 405; Brookey and Gray 108) while others have theorized how they establish initial audience expectations about a film or a story before they watch it. Jonathan Gray diverges from Genette in that he states how audiences are constantly making sense of texts and "para" elements around it in tandem—the two cannot be separated and distinctly categorized (Gray). This is particularly relevant for films where there are so many creative influences in producing the final product; directors, multiple screenwriters, authors, and actors, all have varying degrees of influence over how the audience perceives the film, and what meanings are deliberately attached to it by various stakeholders in the creative process.

Other authors such as Deborah Alisson and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer have lent greater attention to opening credits, which serve to set the mood of a film or a television show and foreshadow the experience (qtd in Klecker 408). Sometimes, narrations, which are not part of the plot itself, albeit not outside the film, assist in the reiteration and reinforcement of intended messages, and align audience reception with them. Scholars such as Roy Sommer have focused on reviews, posters, interactions with cast members, and interviews in establishing audience expectations and influencing the process of interpretation of a film or a drama (qtd in Klecker 406). Drawing on this discussion further, this essay focuses on audience reception and continuous engagement with a web of paratextual information. Paratexts have framing functions

with which drama audiences continue to interact actively and use to associate with like-minded people especially through digitized media, in order to respond to narratives around in the text itself.

Paratexts develop in relation to social, cultural and religious contexts. Interactions with paratextual elements become active sites of cultural negotiations. Advertisements, films, games, magazines, and television dramas are all gendered spaces where traditional gender stereotypes are routinely negotiated. Suzanne Scott has argued that toys and other collectable objects for fans could be seen as paratexts in the case of the Star Wars franchise. She elaborates how fans are assisted in attaining hints regarding the plot through such objects. In the case of the launch of Star Wars toy collection, fans reacted to the absence of the main female character's toy which sparked the #WheresRey campaign (Scott 141-142). This signifies how makers of the film and managers of franchises assume such series to have a predominantly male fan base, gatekeeping their female audiences through paratextual erasure of female lead characters—female toy figures in particular. A visual text communicates across different contexts through advertisements, promotional activities, cast interviews. These paratextual elements which surround the actual text, signpost for audiences whether they are invited as viewers or not. In Pakistan, dramas are evidently advertised for a largely female audience and hence become key areas for negotiation of questions around gender and morality.

Paratextual analysis of a Pakistani drama thus calls for unpacking gendered questions. Most storylines in Pakistani dramas revolve around the good woman versus bad woman dichotomy, while dealing with female morality and sexuality in different ways. These dramas have continued to romanticize an ideal woman, focusing on concepts such as izzat or honor of the woman, her status and sanctity as a wife, a mother, and a sister. Sadaf Ahmad, analyzing the depiction and role of rape in Pakistani cinema, finds that rape is instrumental in showing a bad woman her fate, acting as a punishment for violating the sanctity of womanhood, for being too greedy or too Western (Ahmad 395). In a similar way, the *MPTH* plot also shows how the female lead, Mehwish, suffers and is punished for being an ungrateful wife.

### **Paratexts and Audience Reception**

*MPTH* enjoyed extravagant promotional campaigns by its channel, ARY Digital, celebrity cast interviews and cinema screenings. The playwright, Qamar, remained at the forefront, participating in the televised conversations that centered around it. However, it is unclear whether it was the celebrity actors who were able to amass the audiences and ultimately fed into its massive popularity, or was it the popularity which, in turn, rendered its cast members and the production team more visibility in the media. Nonetheless, it was Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar who played a principal role in framing not only the text (drama), but also its paratextual narratives for a massive audience. His commentary on its central theme, female infidelity, played a crucial role in framing the debate regarding controlling women's morality and behavior through social and religious norms.

Narratives that emerge from a particular drama, especially one with widespread popularity transcend its own paratexts, and influence the ways future content will be produced. When a drama gets high ratings, becomes a household name, or generates public expression on social media, it sets the content creators into motion. What kind of content is being appreciated, how it

is being perceived and interpreted by the audiences, and the kinds of narratives sold the most are important questions production companies routinely deliberate on with the help of directors and scriptwriters. In addition to this, such deliberations also shape the process of how the drama would be watched and interpreted, which kind of audiences it would attract, and what conversations it would stir. Drama creators and producers can use these trends to identify popular and profitable narratives. Their paratextual analysis additionally provides insight into the nature of the reviewing publics. How the audience interprets questions of gender, morality, role of religion, conformity and social norms occurs in relation to how these themes unravel on television through the script, cast members, and insights provided by other stakeholders involved in its production. More specifically, all these factors shape the portrayal of questions of morality and gender or television, and consequently in what light the audiences interpret this cultural information.

The last episode of the drama *MPTH*, was screened in cinemas nation-wide, owing to the massive popularity it gained in the span of a few months. The last time a television drama enjoyed similar levels of popularity and success in becoming a household name, was *Humsafar/Companion* (dir. Sarmad Khoosat 2011), written by Farhat Ishtiaq. However, having the concluding episode of a blockbuster drama screened in the cinemas had so far been an unprecedented move. One factor, though, could be significant in explaining why this happened. Bollywood, or Indian cinema, has a sizeable audience in Pakistan. However, owing to rising political tensions between the historically hostile neighbors, Indian (Bollywood) films were banned for screenings across Pakistan, and with its own domestic film industry being in a relatively weaker position in international film arena, the local cinemas suffered a blow. These single-episode cinema screenings, hence, translated into an opportunity for these local cinema houses to attract consumers. However, the cinema screening of *MPTH* cannot be explained merely as a marketing strategy for cinema businesses. Garnering massive popularity, it was “throned” as Hall would argue, as the first drama in Pakistan whose concluding episode was granted cinema screening. More than being barely a marketing strategy, it speaks to the nationwide popularity of the drama and even legitimizes *for* the audiences what is worthy of being watched and what is not.

Elaborating on *MPTH*'s paratextual elements and why they warrant attention, its writer Qamar remained on the frontlines steering his own narrative on his script. Its dialogues also gained a lot of attention, especially on social media, and sparked intense debates. One such instance was a phrase “*do takkay ki aurat*” (‘a two-bit woman’) used to describe the character of the cheating wife, Mehwish. Many lauded him for his creativity that awarded a greedy woman exactly what she deserved – being abandoned by a living husband and son– a life of loss of loved ones, loneliness, and shame. Others criticized it for its misogyny, as men were not held accountable by writers in their scripts, and their acts of infidelity in dramas were routinely trivialized, shrugged off, and forgiven as mistakes.

Qamar's views regarding women's morality legitimized and concretized the notions regarding women who transgress social bounds as being worthy of graver punishments than men. This sentiment was visible through audience engagement in the form of comments on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Although social media posts overwhelmingly supported Qamar's message in the drama, there were still plenty of people who resisted and actively criticized him. All such voices were building a diverse body of paratexts around *MPTH*. An interview on Samaa TV, a popular news channel, featured Qamar along with the women's rights activist and

Women's Action Forum member, Tahira Abdullah on the panel ("Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar, Owais Touheed debate gender issues"). Abdullah confronted Qamar on live television, criticizing him for his inaccurate assumptions and reductionist notions regarding women in general, and feminism in particular.

Audiences problematized his conduct in varying capacities – through articles, social media comments, satirical videos, and social media posts. However, the degree of attention that he enjoyed was substantial, and he repeatedly made appearances in various interviews on both social and traditional media. He would be questioned by various journalists or interviewers regarding traits that ought to characterize 'good woman' or a woman worthy of respect. In response, he frequently emphasized on chastity, loyalty and submission to religious norms and values as being key traits of a 'good woman'.

In addition to the author's interviews, the celebrated cast of *MPTH*, many of whom shot to fame only after its success, were repeatedly invited for interviews. Interviewers would ask them to define what disloyalty or infidelity constituted in their opinions, and what kinds of punishments culprits deserved for such acts. These culturally loaded conversations reinforce the relative fates of each gender in society as well as their acceptable moral codes. Perhaps the popularity of problematic narratives and sensational storytelling serve as evidence that such interviews with popular cast and crew members act as valuable marketing and promotional strategies— in a context where content aligning with gendered and religious norms and reductive notions of morality sells as it resonates with popular views in Pakistan. In many instances, these interviews turned into moral "sermons" as to what a man and a woman ought to act like in order to deserve a respectable position in society. The legitimacy *MPTH* enjoyed fed into its popularity, while at the same time, was reflective of how the narrative was internalized by audiences. These conversations, especially those with Qamar, entrenched the idea that an unfaithful woman is unworthy of redemption and has to lose all respect as a mother, wife, sister, and ultimately as a human, whereas a man in a similar situation merely errs, can be morally rehabilitated, and deserves another chance. Apart from passive framing or subtle messaging by the drama, epitexts in this case clearly flagged for the audiences their take on issues of male and female morality.

Apart from interviews, other diegetic and non-diegetic elements also help directors or screenwriters in framing intended messages, Costume, lighting, music, and the lyrics of the original soundtrack (OST) direct the way the content is perceived by the public. In the case of *MPTH*, the lead protagonist Danish, the husband who is cheated on, enjoys long, deliberately sermonized, poetic dialogues that elaborate on archetypes of a morally upright and chaste woman. The most prized dialogue was the "*do takkay ki aurat*" ('two-bit woman') in the twelfth episode, which is what Danish refers to his wife as when speaking to Shehwar, the man with whom she has an extra-marital affair. Danish says, "You were offering me 50 million for this two-bit [cheap] woman". During the scene, Mehwish, who silently stares at Danish, is shown to be a passive object on the screen and her reactions are brief. Through the dialogues, the music that plays in the background and the positions of the characters within the frame of the camera, she is particularly targeted, though Shehwar, a married millionaire, is also present. She is portrayed as greedy, materialistic and objectified for her flawless beauty as she 'transgresses' from her prescribed role to the extent that she leaves her eight-year-old son behind. In shots where characters are silent in the aforementioned sequence, the OST plays in the background, which sarcastically congratulates Mehwish for her disloyalty. Many of *MPTH's* dialogues

immediately began to trend on Twitter, or shared on Facebook, and exclusively targeted Mehwish for her infidelity while Shehwar's character was never held accountable.

Another such dialogue is one of Danish's friend, Mateen, who puts the onus of infidelity entirely on Mehwish. He says, "A woman is not naturally capable of infidelity and if she does cheat, she is unworthy of being a woman". Only a low-volume instrumental plays in the background with the camera zoomed in on Danish and Mateen's facial expressions. The conversation resembles a sermon, as if it is Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar reiterating his own views on female morality and sexuality through the voice of the character. Mateen's character never once mentions the married man, Shehwar, she cheats with, almost absolving men of any culpability even if they are also married. This illustrates how disloyalty to a partner or cheating in a marriage is deliberately turned into a gendered 'sin' that only the woman has committed who transgressed in the role of a wife, mother and a homemaker in *MPTH*.

High TRP ratings or excessive social media engagement with its dialogues did not just reflect *MPTH*'s popularity, but in fact, also fed into its hype. It allowed audiences to engage with the drama through social media interactions or discussions on traditional media, and more people would then turn to watch the drama after they witnessed the hype around it. For instance, commenters under episodes of *MPTH* on YouTube or on other platforms frequently mentioned that they had been drawn to the drama after its popularity. Even after the drama neared its end, many would express that they came to view it after they heard any one of the cast members, Qamar, or even after a small clip of dialogue caught their attention. Such comments under old episodes, for instance, would have been written months after the airing date of an episode. More specifically, popularity of dialogues such as "two-bit woman" or scenes, such as Danish's death scene or even the humor which surrounded the drama in the form of parodies and memes on social media was, in turn, actively framing the interpretation process *MPTH* and streamlining the narrative it had already created on themes of marriage, female morality, religious or gendered norms. ("Best Mere Pass Tum Ho Memes Will Make You Laugh."). Many instances would serve as moments in which those certain narratives were in Stuart Hall's words "throned" and "dethroned". In a larger framework, it serves to place women and men in their respective positions and illustrate the consequences of what would follow if one dare violates them.

### **Social Media as a Site of Negotiating Gender and Morality**

Although paratextual information plays a crucial role in influencing how audiences make sense of the cultural information being conveyed to them, especially through framing techniques, there are moments of resistance in spaces that various groups create to express and consolidate their identity against the dominant paratextual discourse. Digital space, particularly social media, opens new avenues for expressions of religion, morality, social norms, class, and gender. Jonathan Gray expounds how social media has the potential to turn into site of "organizational system" for people to flock together, generate reactions to a media text even before it is released and create filters for the way it would then be viewed post release (Brookey and Gray 104).

Chris Julian extends Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital to the digital space and considers online interactions as extensions of one's online existence and a new form of "digital social capital" (10). Most of the dialogues that trended on Twitter or Facebook from *MPTH* were then discussed in tweets, statuses, and memes. Some people criticized the script, while others

exchanged remarks on consequences for a cheating woman. The memes or parodies were sometimes exaggerations of the actual content of the drama, which were, in turn, a site of cultural reproduction. The memes' popularity was dependent on the degree or extent of resonance the audience felt towards a certain aspect of the drama in order for it to be shared further. Juliana Brunello explains that humor, specifically meme culture, is a form of expression of shared knowledge of individuals through which narratives prevalent in society are molded, exaggerated or even regressed in memes in order to express one's own position on social media. According to Heyligha, memes represent shared "habits, ideas and traditions" (qtd in Brunello). Heyligha further argues that people who repeatedly share and re-share the memes or watch the parodies form solidarities around shared norms, values, and certain gendered codes of society – or an aversion and evasion of them in a way – to either reinforce them or critique them through employment of humor and satire.

Debates on social media have also highlighted ideological divisions within gender groups. Such divisions also emerge in the web of *MPTH* paratexts. Most prominently, women who oppose traditional gender stereotypes were at odds with the ones who support them, as the latter are perceived to have internalized misogynistic and patriarchal values. The former is the group of women who actively criticize the narrative advertised by the drama on social media. They expressed that *MPTH* is demeaning towards women and called out the actors and the writer for their misogynistic portrayal of adulterous women without the same treatment for the male character. On the other hand, it is the latter group of women who are usually seen to be lauding the dialogues which serve to remind women of their fate in society if they dare to cross socially prescribed limits that are encoded in gendered norms. Conversations on social media turned into how women should rightfully be punished more severely for infidelity or greed because they violate the sanctity of motherhood. Simultaneously, there are both men and women who carve out their own spaces to express alternate views. Therefore, the reason a dialogue from *MPTH* begins to trend on social media is not only the drama or the opinions of its spokespeople, but also the voices of people opposing its rhetoric.

These voices can sometimes present diverse opinions and add meaningful angles to the existing paratextual discourse. For instance, in actress Sonya Hussyn's web interview with Iffat Omar, Hussyn claimed that she was initially offered the lead role of Mehwish in *MPTH*, which she rejected, as she disapproved of the way a woman was being represented in a society where she already struggles for equality and is routinely belittled. She was also of the view that when it comes to televised representations of women, actors should assume responsibility towards storytelling and should serve as agents of progress. Similar sentiments have been expressed by actors such as Sania Saeed, and Haseena Moin, a celebrated television writer of the decade of the eighties. They expressed in their interviews that women need to be portrayed as individuals in their own right, as agents who progress and become an inspiration for women to overcome their personal and social constraints.

Further, in these interviews, both Saeed and Moin expressed their discomfort with the current on-screen portrayal of women as passive individuals, subservient to the male lead and deprived of any agency in plots. They also criticized the glorification of female suffering, romanticization of weeping heroines who are submissive, and weak. Moin fondly spoke of the headstrong, career-driven, and passionate female characters she crafted, whose characters had nuanced arcs and layered emotions, and were primary agents in the plot (Haseena Moin). Similarly, one of the female cast members of *MPTH*, Rehmat Ajmal, posted a statement on her Instagram handle

distancing herself from the project on grounds that she was previously unaware of the problematic views its celebrated author held (“Rehmat Ajmal Distances Herself”). These aforementioned examples manifest how all these women formed the counter-narrative for drama within its paratextual landscape despite pronounced reinforcement of a certain narrative by its creators.

This paratextual counter narrative emerges from a recognition that most female characters are shown to be objectified and flag bearers of honor—dehumanized in the process and stripped of subtlety and gradient in their character arcs. For many others, it is easy to disregard these notions and the drama separate from reality without problematizing regressive tropes. This latter group is likely to perceive television dramas as harmless, innate and inconsequential for the material realities of life. Hence, memes, statuses, or even tweets perhaps, are expressions of antagonism and can act as avenues for otherization of groups of people which, in turn, could polarize them as in the case of *Meray Paas Tum Ho*.

As a result of the Sirmed versus Qamar argument on television, audiences on both social and traditional media took different positions and formed solidarities through the act of re-sharing different social media posts. Falling on either side of the narrative or its converse, audiences formed a complex network of interaction where groups of men and women negotiated questions of morality and religiosity. Social media became emphatically polarized where these questions were in constant contestation. They reacted to Sirmed chanting the feminist slogan “*mera jism meri marzi*” (‘my body, my choice’) on live television and Qamar hurling verbal abuses at her in return. This slogan, amongst many others from Aurat March, the women’s protest held annually, was interpreted as provocative and vulgar by many in Pakistan. The debate that followed went beyond just two people indulging in a heated argument on live television. The situation was interpreted in regard to what it means for a woman to be chanting this slogan, and how it represents groups of women who have morally transgressed and turned away from socio-religious norms in Pakistan. Bodily autonomy was reductively equated with nudity which violates religious boundaries legitimized by the society as well as the state in Pakistan. Many women reacted strongly to Qamar’s misogyny, moral righteousness, and hostility towards women in the interview. These discussions directly influence the way the audience maintains engagement with multiple facets of cultural information and contextualize it and the drama itself in a certain light. Hence, there is an interplay of actions and reactions to the content of the drama and its paratexts in such an intrinsic way that the former cannot be separated from the latter.

### **Nature of the Television Dramas and Reviewing Publics**

Portrayals of moral codes in Pakistani television drama arena, particularly those regarding loyalty and chastity have an evident double standard for males and females and have implications for how they would be publicly perceived. The common denominator for the ‘good’ woman prototype is one with an upright, moral character, a responsible mother, solely committed to preserve and spearhead the sanctity of the house. To exemplify this further, the paper will compare the gendered treatment of the theme of infidelity put forth by *Bewafa/Unfaithful* (dir. Aabis Raza, 2019) and *Meray Paas Tum*. *Bewafa* began airing on the same television channel, ARY Entertainment as *MPTH*, which is one of the leading drama channels of Pakistan with big budget productions released throughout the year. The first episodes

of these two dramas aired a month apart. However, the audience reactions and their reception have been vastly divergent despite their plots following similar underlying themes.

*Bewafa* is a suitable comparison for the paratextual analysis of *MPTH* because both plotlines revolve around the stories of a cheating partner in a heterosexual marriage. In *MPTH*, Mehwish's character is a cheating wife, whereas in *Bewafa*, the unfaithful partner is the husband, Ahaan. Infidelity of a married partner is the central plot device in both stories. Yet, the way the two stories unfold, the way their dialogues are written and delivered, and treatment of characters is starkly different. The two dramas deal with questions of morality, obligations in a marriage, and conformity to social norms. However, both dramas answer these questions following strictly gendered patterns. In both cases, the onus is laid on the woman, who digressed from social norms and is thus responsible for what the man does. In the case of *MPTH*, the unfaithful wife had been disobedient, ungrateful and greedy, and violated the sanctity of marriage, home, and motherhood. Whereas in *Bewafa*, the onus of cheating fell on the 'other woman', Shireen, who became Ahaan's second wife after being his extra-marital love interest. His first wife, Kinza was also not also free of culpability. She was written and portrayed as an excessively intrusive, skeptical, and invasive wife who would frequently check his phone and question him due her distrustful nature. Therefore, she was served a lesson and spared a chance to mend her ways. Shireen, on the flip side, was a prototypical villain in the story; she was a liar, a manipulator and greedy in search of a rich husband. She manipulated Ahaan into falling for her, who was portrayed as an unhappy husband craving mental peace and escape.

In *MPTH*, Mehwish was not rewarded any chance of redemption, and her former husband Danish dies of the pain which his disloyal wife had inflicted on him. However, *Bewafa* sees a happy ending. Ahaan is forgiven at the end by Kinza and his mother, and he is brought back by Kinza's persistence to save their marriage and home towards the final episodes. She is repeatedly told by her mother-in-law that Ahaan has been manipulated by the cunning Shireen and Kinza should win Ahaan back through her patience and loyalty. Ahaan's disloyalty is disregarded as a temporary digression and an error, whereas Mehwish's act of cheating is termed as *gunnah* ('sin') and even *shirk* ('polytheism') by her ex-husband. Even towards *MPTH*'s conclusion, Shehwar's wife forgives him and regains her rightful place at home which was temporarily snatched by Mehwish. *Gunnah* and *shirk* are religious terms which are selectively employed as seen in the two cases, only to hold the woman accountable. In a conversation between two of Mehwish' two friends in episode 19, the characters discuss why a woman's act of infidelity deserves wrath. The claim is it is because she violates the sanctity of a home, violates a social contract, *nikkah*, ('marriage') and becomes a violator of a sacred bond between the two partners in marriage. No such conversations take place to hold the men accountable or to remind them of their duties as a partner in either of the dramas. Thus, cheating and disloyalty become a question of gendered morality and also a means of keeping women confined to socially constructed bounds of correct behaviour, particularly using a religious narrative.

*Bewafa* and *Meray Paas Tum Ho* tell similar stories, with the main difference being the gender of the disloyal character. The male is not censured for infidelity, rather the onus is thrown on the woman for leading an otherwise innocent man astray. The two dramas can reveal important insights about the storytellers and the audiences through the extension of Genette's paratextual framework. *Bewafa* did not garner the same public attention or audience reactions, and male infidelity was normalized in the narrative of the story. The fact that it did not receive the same amount of marketing by the television channel, as well as engagement by the same audience

illustrates to some degree the way male disloyalty in a relationship is viewed as mundane – and such stories treated as run-of-the-mill. The drama *Bewafa* also lacked its own paratextual engagement of the same level as *MPTH*. The latter’s paratextual landscape also reveals that the way the plots and the characters unfold on-screen and the way these are interpreted by the audience shows that infidelity or disloyalty becomes a problem when the person committing it is a woman. More specifically, it is the woman’s act of transgression which becomes a question of morality for society and the behavior is thus deemed worthy of retribution.

## Conclusion

To sum up, this essay has argued that we cannot definitively say whether dramas are agents of change or solidifiers of a patriarchal status quo. It is perhaps a complex negotiation taking place at different times, amongst different actors who are storing pieces of cultural information being provided to them and reacting to diverse sources of paratextual information as fans, viewers or even as observers. The essay has shown how audiences interact with the messages (intended and unintended) emanated in the form of both texts and paratexts by storytellers, actors and different groups within the audiences, in order to develop their own social, cultural and religious narratives. Further, the debates surrounding *MPTH* show how dramas and their paratexts are equally important in stirring important conversations which are culturally coded and interact with the wider socio-political climate in Pakistan.

## Film Synopsis

### *Meray Paas Tum Ho*

The story revolves around a middle-class couple, Danish and Mehwish. Mehwish leaves Danish for a wealthy man Shehwar and their marriage ends as a result of her ungrateful and greedy nature. Distraught at his wife’s infidelity, Danish, who is an honest man and a passionate civil servant, decides to invest in the stock exchange market to avenge his rival Shehwar and ends up making money through the help of his childhood friends. Towards the end, Mehwish deeply regrets her choice to leave her marriage after Shehwar’s wife, Maham, learns about her husband’s affair. Shehwar is arrested by the police after Maham accuses him of financial fraud and Mehwish is left without a shelter. Mehwish is not awarded any redemption in the end as Danish dies of a heart attack in the last episode, and she is left with a lifetime of regret and guilt for her behavior.

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## **Filmography**

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