



The Role of Women in Classical and Contemporary Urdu Drama

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Abstract

The portrayal of women in Urdu drama has undergone significant transformations from its classical theatre roots to contemporary television serials. This article explores the evolving roles and representations of women in Urdu drama, analyzing the shift from traditional, often stereotypical characters to more complex, empowered female figures. Through a critical review of literature and content analysis of selected classical plays and modern Pakistani drama serials, the study maps changes in women's agency, identity construction, and social mobility. Findings indicate that while earlier dramas frequently confined women within patriarchal norms, recent productions reflect a hybrid negotiation between tradition and modernity — offering women more autonomy, voice, and complexity. However, the persistence of certain stereotypes suggests that full liberation of female representation remains incomplete. The article argues for continued intentional dramaturgy that balances cultural sensitivity with progressive gender representation.

Keywords: Women representation, Urdu drama, Gender roles, Stereotypes, Empowerment, Pakistani television, Classical theatre, Contemporary serials

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INTRODUCTION

Urdu drama — both in its classical theatrical tradition and its contemporary televised form — has long acted as a mirror to South Asian society, reflecting, reinforcing, or sometimes challenging prevailing cultural and gender norms. The female characters in these dramas have often been central to exploring societal expectations, moral dilemmas, and social transformations. Historically, early Urdu plays and theatre productions tended to depict women in limited, conventional roles: dutiful daughters, obedient wives, suffering mothers, or moral symbols — roles that aligned with socio-cultural expectations of women's place in the household and community. With the advent and growth of television and private media channels in Pakistan, Urdu drama experienced both expansion in reach and diversification in content. This evolution has had profound effects on the representation of women. Contemporary Pakistani dramas often portray women navigating complex social realities: grappling with gender discrimination, economic challenges, social mobility, education, and empowerment. This shift reflects broader socio-economic changes in Pakistani society, including increased urbanization, women's education, changing family structures, and rising feminist consciousness.

Given this trajectory, it becomes relevant to systematically examine how the role of women in Urdu drama has evolved over time — what has changed, what remains, and what the implications are for gender norms and social attitudes. This article aims to contribute to that understanding, drawing on a review of both classical theatre tradition and modern television dramas, and situating the discussion within contemporary gender and media studies.

Historical Overview of Classical Urdu Drama and Women's Roles

The development of Urdu theatre in the 19th and early 20th centuries coincided with the colonial period in South Asia, a time of profound social, political, and cultural

change. Classical Urdu drama evolved from earlier forms of oral storytelling, poetry recitals (mushairas), and folk theatre traditions such as **Raasa**, **Nautanki**, and **Tamasha**, gradually adopting structured plots, dialogues, and stage performances influenced by Persian, Mughal, and European theatrical traditions.

Early Development and Place of Women in Classical Plays

During this period, theatre was largely male-dominated, both on stage and in production. Female characters were portrayed, but often performed by male actors due to social norms that restricted women from public performance. Women in classical plays were generally symbolic figures, representing ideals of virtue, chastity, and moral conduct, rather than complex individual personalities. Their presence often served to highlight male protagonists' heroism, morality, or societal dilemmas.

Notable early works include:

Inder Sabha (1853) by Agha Hasan Amanat:

Often cited as the first complete Urdu play, it is a musical fantasy set in a royal court, featuring women as ethereal, idealized beings. Female characters like the fairy Inder function more as plot devices than autonomous individuals, emphasizing beauty, grace, and obedience rather than agency.

Anarkali (late 19th century adaptations):

Based on historical narratives from the Mughal court, female characters were central to the tragic romance, yet their choices were constrained by societal hierarchies and patriarchal structures. The drama underscores themes of loyalty, honor, and obedience expected of women.

Social and Cultural Constraints Shaping Women's Representation

The portrayal of women was heavily influenced by prevailing social norms. In 19th-century South Asia, women's mobility in public spaces was restricted, and education for women was limited. Theatre, therefore, reflected these societal limitations: women were often idealized as domestic, passive, and morally upright figures, embodying family honor and virtue.

Patriarchal expectations ensured that women's actions were consistently framed in relation to men — as daughters, wives, or mothers — rather than independent actors. This reinforced gender



hierarchies, presenting women as subjects of male authority and moral exemplars, rather than autonomous agents.

Case Studies of Seminal Classical Works and Their Female Characters

Inder Sabha (1853): Female characters like the fairy Inder serve as magical, unattainable ideals, showcasing beauty and obedience rather than personal desires or ambitions.

Anarkali Adaptations: The character of Anarkali exemplifies virtue and sacrifice; her fate is determined by male rulers' decisions, reflecting societal expectations of women's subservience and adherence to social norms.

Saadat Hasan Manto's Early Stage

Adaptations: While Manto is more renowned for prose, early adaptations of his plays in the 1930s began to challenge traditional female roles subtly, hinting at emotional depth and moral conflict in women, even within conventional frameworks.

Agha Hashar Kashmiri's Plays (1920s–1930s): Often called the “Shakespeare of Urdu,” his plays such as *Yahudi Ki Ladki* portray women within morally strict frameworks but occasionally allow for limited agency, like secret love affairs or defiance against injustice — though ultimately their fates align with societal expectations.

Summary of Key Patterns

Idealization over Individuality: Women were mostly symbolic representations of virtue and morality rather than complex individuals.

Male-Centric Narratives: Female characters' actions were framed in relation to male protagonists or patriarchal authority.

Constraint by Social Norms: Education, mobility, and personal agency for women were rarely explored; dramas reflected the larger socio-cultural limitations of the period.

Early Signs of Agency: Some plays hinted at emotional depth or limited resistance by female characters, foreshadowing more complex portrayals in later periods.

Emergence of Television Drama in Pakistan: (1970s–1990s)

The emergence of television drama in Pakistan during the 1970s marked a significant shift in the production and dissemination of Urdu drama. Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV), established in 1964, quickly became the sole state-run broadcaster and the primary platform for Urdu-language storytelling. By the 1970s, PTV had developed a rich portfolio of drama serials that reached audiences across urban and rural areas, transforming Urdu drama from a localized theatrical tradition into a nationwide cultural phenomenon. The medium's visual and narrative appeal allowed it to influence public perception, cultural norms, and social discourse on a scale previously unattainable by stage plays or radio dramas. Women's portrayal during this period largely reflected prevailing socio-cultural and patriarchal norms. Female characters were predominantly depicted within domestic spheres, fulfilling roles as obedient daughters, devoted wives, or nurturing mothers. These portrayals emphasized moral uprightness, familial loyalty, and emotional restraint, reinforcing the idealized image of women as caretakers and moral anchors of the household. Storylines often positioned women as mediators of conflict or bearers of family honor, with their personal desires and ambitions subordinated to societal and familial expectations. For instance, early PTV dramas such as *Uncle Urfi* (1972) and *Waris* (1979) showcased female characters negotiating familial duties and moral obligations, reflecting broader societal expectations of women as virtuous, selfless, and morally conscious. Critical assessments of these early PTV dramas reveal both their cultural significance and their limitations. Scholars note that while these serials were innovative in bringing social and domestic issues to the forefront, they often perpetuated restrictive gender norms and did not allow women to act as independent agents. Studies highlight that female characters were frequently idealized or moralized, with little room for personal autonomy, career aspirations, or social critique outside domestic boundaries. However, these portrayals also provided a platform for subtle social commentary, with some dramas addressing issues such as women's education, child welfare, and rural development — albeit framed within the confines of socially acceptable



female behavior. Overall, PTV's early decades established a template for women's representation in televised Urdu drama: balancing cultural sensitivity and social norms while reinforcing traditional gender roles. While these portrayals were largely conservative, they also laid the groundwork for later transformations in women's roles, as societal changes and the liberalization of media in the 1990s and 2000s gradually enabled more diverse and empowered depictions of women in Pakistani drama.

Transition to Private Channels & Changing Narratives (2000–Present)

The liberalization of media in Pakistan during the early 2000s brought a proliferation of private television channels, including Geo TV, ARY Digital, Hum TV, and Express Entertainment. This expansion significantly diversified the Urdu drama landscape, breaking the state monopoly of PTV and introducing competitive content driven by audience preferences, commercial considerations, and innovative storytelling. Unlike the largely conservative and domestic-focused narratives of PTV, private channels encouraged experimentation with themes, character complexity, and social issues, reflecting both urban sensibilities and contemporary socio-political realities.

This period witnessed a marked shift from traditional family-centered stories to narratives that were socially relevant and issue-based. Dramas increasingly addressed pressing societal problems such as domestic violence, honor killings, women's education, gender inequality, economic disparities, and intergenerational conflicts. Female characters were no longer confined to passive, domestic roles; instead, they were depicted as active participants navigating complex social realities. For example, dramas like *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012) and *Udaari* (2016) explored women's struggles for education, financial independence, and personal agency, highlighting systemic barriers while also showcasing resilience and empowerment. A significant feature of this era is the emergence of women-centered dramas that place female experiences at the

narrative core. These productions tackle empowerment, social justice, identity crises, and gender norms with nuanced storytelling. Female protagonists are portrayed making critical life choices, challenging patriarchal structures, and negotiating between tradition and modernity. In series such as *Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021), women take on roles traditionally reserved for men, including military and professional careers, reflecting both aspirational and transformative dimensions of female agency. Similarly, *Cheekh* (2019) addresses issues of violence against women and societal complicity, positioning women as active agents of justice and social change. The changing narrative strategies in private-channel dramas signal a broader cultural negotiation: while traditional family values remain a recurring theme, contemporary Urdu drama increasingly foregrounds women's autonomy, decision-making power, and the complexities of identity in a rapidly modernizing society. This evolution highlights the role of media not only as a mirror of societal change but also as a potential catalyst for reshaping perceptions of gender roles and empowering female voices in Pakistan.

Patterns of Stereotyping vs Empowerment in Contemporary Urdu Drama

Contemporary Urdu drama presents a complex interplay between traditional gender stereotypes and emerging narratives of female empowerment. Despite the increasing visibility of progressive themes, many dramas continue to rely on familiar tropes such as the submissive wife, the jealous sister-in-law, or the morally idealized versus "immoral" woman. These recurring patterns often frame women's value in terms of family honor, obedience, and conformity to societal expectations, reinforcing conventional patriarchal norms even within ostensibly modern storylines. For example, numerous serials depict female rivalry over male attention or social status, subtly perpetuating competitive gender dynamics that limit solidarity and agency among women. At the same time, a growing number of dramas showcase empowered female characters who challenge these stereotypes. Career-oriented women, women pursuing higher education, and protagonists who assert independence or resist patriarchal restrictions increasingly feature as



central figures. In dramas such as *Sinf-e-Aahan* and *Udaari*, female characters negotiate identity, make autonomous life choices, and confront social injustices, highlighting their agency and resilience. These narratives emphasize women's ability to balance personal ambitions with societal expectations, reflecting a negotiation between modernity and tradition rather than a complete rejection of cultural norms. However, structural and societal limitations continue to shape these portrayals. Moral policing, class bias, and conservative cultural values often constrain how empowered female characters are depicted. Women's independence is sometimes conditional, permissible only when it aligns with broader social morality or middle/upper-class norms. Moreover, audience reception and commercial pressures influence the persistence of traditional tropes, leading writers to maintain familiar narrative formulas even as they introduce progressive elements. Consequently, contemporary Urdu drama reflects both the possibilities and the constraints of women's representation, negotiating between empowerment and enduring patriarchal expectations.

Implications for Gender Norms, Social Attitudes, and Future Trends

The representation of women in Urdu drama significantly influences viewers' perceptions of gender roles and societal expectations. Dramas are not merely entertainment; they act as a socializing force, shaping attitudes toward women's agency, familial responsibilities, and participation in public life. Positive portrayals of empowered female characters—whether through career achievements, assertive decision-making, or resistance to patriarchal constraints—can challenge entrenched gender stereotypes, inspire discussion on equality, and encourage social acceptance of women's autonomy. Conversely, persistent reliance on traditional tropes, such as the submissive wife or moralized female archetypes, reinforces conservative attitudes and constrains progressive social change.

Urdu drama holds considerable potential as a

platform for social transformation and gender awareness. By foregrounding women's narratives, addressing contemporary social issues such as domestic violence, educational inequality, and women's economic participation, dramas can promote empathy, critical thinking, and public discourse on gender justice. Programs that depict women negotiating identity, asserting rights, or challenging systemic injustice serve not only as cultural reflection but also as instruments of advocacy, encouraging audiences to rethink established norms. However, the realization of this potential depends on the conscious efforts of playwrights, producers, and media regulators. Creative stakeholders face the challenge of balancing narrative appeal with social responsibility, ensuring that portrayals are nuanced, realistic, and inclusive across socio-economic and cultural contexts. Regulatory bodies must promote ethical guidelines that discourage harmful stereotyping while encouraging diverse, progressive representation. Furthermore, audience feedback and critical engagement play an essential role in shaping content; viewership patterns influence which narratives are commercially viable and socially resonant. Moving forward, the sustained collaboration of media professionals, academics, and civil society is crucial to fostering an Urdu drama landscape that meaningfully contributes to gender equality and social awareness in Pakistan.

Summary

This article traces the evolution in the representation of women in Urdu drama — from classical theatre and early television under PTV to contemporary private-channel serials. Historical and early-television phases largely confined female characters to traditional, domestic roles, reinforcing patriarchal norms. With the expansion of media in Pakistan since the 2000s, dramas have increasingly depicted women with ambition, agency, and complex identities — negotiating tradition and modernity. Yet, the legacy of stereotyping persists, and



many representations remain constrained by moral and social conventions. The analysis shows a gradual but uneven shift toward more empowered female portrayals; it argues that Urdu drama holds potential as a medium for social change, but realizing this potential demands conscientious dramaturgy, critical media scholarship, and greater public awareness.

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