




Through the Lens of Television: Progression in Portrayal of Pakistani Trans* Community (A study of TV shows from 2010 to 2018)

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the representation of transgender in Pakistani television after a legal breakthrough of transgender laws in 2009. In this development, the Supreme Court of Pakistan provided identity rights to the oppressed trans* community. This study focuses on 24 transgender characters in five Pakistani Urdu TV shows (drama serials and telefilms) aired from 2010 to 2018. Following the research design of Capuzza and Spencer (2017), I employed the methodology of qualitative content analysis and coded 18- minute self-created mini-episodes for casting, visibility, identity, embodiment, and social isolation. My finding suggested that the visibility of transgender people is improved over the course of time in Pakistani Urdu TV shows. However, it does not apply across the spectrum of LGBTQ identities. Although the medium has started presenting transgender in a less conventional way and a verity in characterization is visible, they are still depicted in stigmatized and blue-collar jobs. The socially excluded hijra (bisexual) community is portrayed struggling for its basic human rights and respect. The trans* narrative of “Wrong body” is still the main discourse and reason of subjectivity. Narratives about homosexuality, which are considered contrary to the Islamic perspective, are absent. Mainly the TV shows represent the activism against trans* discrimination that disapproves the inequitable socio-economic and moral practices and emphasizes basic equal rights for the transgender community.

Keywords: Pakistani TV Shows, Khwaja Sara, transgender portrayal, Urdu drama, LGBTQ

INTRODUCTION

Members of Pakistani Trans* community are known as *Khwaja sara*, *Hijra* and *Khusra* in the native Urdu language. In 2009, Taxila (a city in Pakistan) police’s physical and sexual violence against *Khwaja sara* performers triggered a legal petition for *Khwaja sara* rights. Human rights activist M. Aslam Khaki pleaded this case which resulted in a major breakthrough in transgender laws of identity in 2009. There was also a follow-up development in 2017 regarding the provision of basic rights by the Supreme Court of Pakistan. It appears that after the Court’s decision in 2009, the visibility of transgender in the mainstream media has increased significantly. Previously, the depiction of transgender lives had never been the priority of Pakistani television shows. Occasionally some cisgender actors would be asked to perform transgender roles to add an element of

comedy for the viewers. These characters would mainly act as a laughing stock in films and dramas. The depiction of transgender in media was more or less the same in the entire region of south Asia (Khan, 2017; Roy, 2017; Walsh, 2001)

This paper explores the representation of transgender through Pakistani television from 2010 to 2018. In this study, I have followed the research design of Capuzza and Spencer (2017) who analyzed the representation of transgender in scripted US television dramas and comedies (2008-2014). They found a progression in visibility of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Queer (LGBTQ) with diverse narratives of identity, embodiment and social interactions. There appears to be a similar situation in Pakistan in terms of progression in the media representation of transgender community. Although the visibility of lesbian and gay communities is totally absent in Pakistani mainstream media, the progression in transgender roles on the small screen is existent. The prohibition of homosexuality with the strict punishments in the Quran have proscribed and pushed people away from any desire which fall outside the heteronormativity. *Khwaja saras'* self-identity as homosexual in the Muslim society is a big obstruction in their acceptance because the religious environment of Pakistan does not support the western mainstream queer perceptions. (Khan, 2017). Although "sodomy is criminalized in Pakistan, the gay/lesbian groups operate in the shadows." (Dickson & Sanders, 2014, p. 341). Some legal institutions are notably hostile towards homosexuality.

After 2009, the Pakistani visual media has started presenting transgender in a less conventional way. The visibility of transgender has increased in TV shows. In this paper, I argue that less stereotypical roles and a variety in characterization is perceptible in visual mainstream media. The socially excluded *Khwaja sara* community is depicted struggling for their basic human rights and respect. The trans* narrative of "wrong body" is still the main discourse and reason of subjectivity. Narratives about homosexuality which are considered contrary to the Islamic perspective are absent. Furthermore, the study shows a change of narrative in mainstream media that depicts the struggle against transgender discrimination and disapproves the inequitable socio-economic practices and emphasizes the provision of basic human rights for the transgender community.

PORTRAYAL OF TRANSGENDER IN PAST PAKISTANI TV DRAMAS

Research has shown that in Pakistan members of the *Khwaja sara* community are significantly vilified, harassed, and discriminated against in everyday life (Cooke & Kim, 2017; Dickson & Sanders, 2014; Jaspal, n.d.; Saeed, Mughal, & Farooq, 2018; van Wijngaarden & Iqbal, 2014). They are still bound to live a socially secluded life. The societal deception and paradoxes keep them from participating in mainstream activities. A myriad of socio-economical and religious constraints pave the way to the adoption of a depraved lifestyle for them, mainly as sex-workers, street dancers or beggars (Abdullah et al., 2012; F. A. Khan, 2014; S. Khan, 2017). This paradoxical behavior of the society defies the basic principles of Islam which teach human dignity, respect, and brotherhood (See Quran, Al-Hujurat, 10; Al-Tin, 4; Al-Isra, 70, etc.).

The subjugation of this community is multifold – including unavailability of educational resources and a dearth of employment – leading the Pakistani *Khwaja sara* community towards stigmatized professions (Collumbien, Chow, Qureshi, Rabbani, & Hawkes, 2008). The underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayals of gender in the media are particularly important, as these gender portrayals construct the viewers' gender beliefs and attitudes (Kharroub & Weaver, 2014). Media has the ability to define gender perceptions in any society. Media shape our understandings of gender and

relationships between the sexes. Media tend to reflect and reproduce cultural ideals and expectations about gender (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2017). Often times, media control and regulate the content about gender that influences the viewer's mind and manipulates gender issues. Research has shown that media frequently present an unrealistic, stereotypical picture of gender. In media, women, transgender, and minorities are underrepresented (Collins, 2011; Wood, 2003). The situation of gender representation is the same in Pakistani media. The male-dominated society of Pakistan endorses men as cultural standards and presents them predominantly in media. The representation of women is not according to their population ratio. Similarly, the presence of minorities and the *Khwaja sara* community in media is also miniscule (Holtzman, 2000; Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012). If media presence is a parameter to gage the importance of any matter, then *Khwaja saras'* minimal media presence indicates their meek and oppressed position in the society.

In the conventional media of the country, such as local festivals and street theaters, *Khwaja saras* have experienced occasional participation, but this is again limited to dance performances on recorded songs. For the television and film industry, generally they opt for the music and dance professions and remain behind the camera. There are a few examples of typical transgender roles which were performed by cisgender actors, but the physical on-screen presence of transgender actors is very rare. The first transgender news anchor, Marvia Malik, (21) appeared on the Pakistani television screen on March 23, 2018 and gained much coverage in national and international media ("Pakistan gets its first transgender news anchor - CNN," n.d.). Similarly, Kami Sid, a transgender model and actor, also started her career in showbiz recently.

The Pakistani drama industry is generally known for its traditional TV shows with archetypal and predictable roles. Unconventional dramas, which oppose the stereotypes and conservative ideology, were not very often showcased in the past. Although TV drama is considered closer to reality, presentation of real issues of the society is a very challenging task in an unfavorable political environment. For the most part, Pakistani dramas are influenced by the political regimes (Kothari, 2005). Generally, the medium of drama is used for entertainment and controversial issues are avoided purposely. This is why no voice in favor of *Khwaja sara* rights has been heard within this forum before the twenty first century. In the past, *Khwaja saras* had never been given a chance to work as artists on screen for the mainstream TV and film industry. In the visual media, their roles were used to add blue comedy in a story and were performed by mainly cisgender artists. The depiction of *Khwaja saras* was mainly ridiculous, undignified, and allegedly humorous. Typically, these roles are based on their gender and by using profane and cheap language in their dialogue when the writer is trying to create humor. These stereotyped optional character-comedy roles are generally created by commercial writers in which, raucous laughter and garish make-up is a necessary element of their portrayal (Gauhar, 2018). Davies and Ilott (2018) describe the representational strategies employed by comedy writers, producers and performers by offering Richard Dyer (1993) characterization: "how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation". Media representations and observational learning also play vital roles in construction of any gender's respect and importance in the society.

PTV (Pakistan television) – the only television channel of Pakistan before 1992 – has offered a few trans* characters in Urdu TV shows without openly mentioning their genders. One example is the character Akbar, a house servant who is presented in an

Urdu drama serial '*Angan Terha*' (Crooked Courtyard) in 1984. It was a comedy serial written by Anwar Maqsood who is famous for his satirical and humorous writing style. Although the gender of Akbar is not disclosed, his body language and feminine speaking style places the character in the category of third gender. Akbar reveals that singing and dancing was his past profession. In the decade of the 90s, more roles of *Khwaja saras* are showcased in their typical style. A popular comedy drama *Janjaal Pura* (Messy City) showcases three stereotypical roles of *Khwaja saras* with gaudy make-up and feminine dresses. They are portrayed in their conventional profession of street dancing and singing.

The inception of the twenty first century marks a comparatively better version of transgender representation. The 2004-05 drama serial *Moorat* (Eunuch's Wedding) depicts the same stereotypes, but it highlights the social issues and hardships faced by the *Khwaja sara* community. ARY Digital network picked a taboo subject and in 33 episodes the drama underscores the miseries and alienation of the neglected community. The story mainly focuses on transgender lives and human emotions. The writer tries to emphasize in the script that "even if they (*Khwaja saras*) are oppressed due to a deprivation from nature, they do not want to keep this deprivation along in their lives. They help other people in the society, but we keep them away from us thinking them atrocious and miserable" ("Writer 'Seema Ghazal' discussing Drama Series Eunuch's Wedding Aka Moorat," n.d.) (Ghazal, 2015). Another example is that of Ali Saleem, a transsexual who performed a dragged-up character of a woman in a popular TV show, 'Late night with Begaum Nawazish Ali' in 2007-08. The show was aired on Aaj TV and gained popularity among Pakistani and Indian audiences. Mainstream visual media do not appear to showcase the narratives of identity for LGBTQ people. Despite curiosity, talking about lesbians, gays and transgender lives has always been taboo in Pakistani society. Overall, visual trans* content of past Urdu TV shows mainly consisted of social interaction and the narratives on embodiment were absent.

In the forthcoming part of this study, I analyze the transgender portrayal of five categories (i.e., casting, visibility, identity, embodiment, and social isolation) and argue that the visibility of transgender characters on the television screen has begun to increase after the decision of the Supreme Court of Pakistan in 2009. However, the improved visibility does not apply across the spectrum of LGBTQ identities. Dramas use socio-religious rhetoric to raise a voice for the provision of basic rights and the acceptance of transgender people in society. Media also offer "wrong body" discourse of transgender identity and partiality. Although transgender roles are less stereotyped and conventional, they are mainly visible doing blue-collar jobs.

METHODOLOGY

This paper analyzes transgender characters of small screen, particularly Pakistani Urdu drama serials and telefilms aired from 2010-2018. I used the methodology of qualitative content analysis because a plethora of qualitative researchers recommend content analysis as predominantly flexible, broad, and useful for interpretation and elucidation of different forms of texts (Chan & Nyback, 2015; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Huiberts, Hjørnevik, Mykletun, & Skogen, 2013). As compared to other qualitative approaches, this method is significantly used in social sciences and humanities to interpret textual data (Krippendorff, 2004; Schreier, 2012). Unlike statistical counting of objects, qualitative content analysis examines intricacies of language and classifies the text into themes, patterns and categories on the basis of similar codes. (Weber, 1990). The process of qualitative content analysis includes addressing the research questions and

defining the categories. Multiple screening and thorough study of visual text is required to analyze data of the selected sample through coding process.

I examined a total of 24 major and supporting transgender roles which meet the criteria described by Smith, Pieper, Granados, and Choueiti (2010) Criteria includes the following: characters must have names; they must speak any dialogue; and they should be recognized by other characters. If the gender of any character is not clearly manifested in the sample, I assess the gender through costumes, dialogue, pronouns used, inclination of the character and context. If the character refers to him/herself as a boy/girl, I mark him/her accordingly. I used pronoun 'hir' for trans characters. By replicating Capuzza and Spencer's (2017) research design, I examined the content of five Urdu TV shows (three drama serials and two telefilms). This purposive sample of TV shows telecast by Pakistani channels during 2010-2018 included three drama serials: *Khuda mera bhi hai* (2016-17), *Alif Allah aur Insan* (2017), *Dil-e-Nadan* (2017-18), and two telefilms: *Chandni* (2016), and *Bhaid Bhao* (2017). I only included shows that featured lead or supporting transgender characters.

The study focuses on finding the answer for what kind of images are reflected through these dramas. The TV shows being considered are telecast through Pakistani entertainment channels and are available on YouTube. Due to a limited number of available TV shows, the methodology of qualitative content analysis is suggested to study the portrayal of transgender roles (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). The TV shows under study consist of two different genres: drama serial and telefilm. Duration of episodes is different in each drama serial. Thus, I mark the shortest duration which is 18 minutes as a standard and divided longer episodes and telefilms into 18 minute slots. In this way I consider each slot as a mini-episode which is my coding unit of analysis. To study the attributes of transgender roles/characters, my two research assistants and I screened all of the above-mentioned shows and transcribed relevant portions and mini-episodes. I identified five coding categories with a slight change of the categories used by Capuzza and Spencer (2017). The categories include casting, visibility, identity, embodiment, and social isolation.

Casting includes the number of transgender roles played by cisgender actors and transgender actors. Visibility is coded as the number of mini-episodes in which the transgender character appeared, amount of screen time per mini-episode, and number of mini-episodes in which a transgender character is discussed by any other character. Identity is coded for gender identity (i.e., transman, transwoman, or genderqueer), religion, (i.e., Muslim and non-Muslim) sexuality, age (infant, tween, teenager, adult, middle-ager, etc). Also coded is whether transgender identity was openly expressed or closeted, the number of scenes in which language mis-gendered the transgender character (i.e. wrong name/pronoun, dehumanizing language such as "*Hijra*" or any other pejorative remarks). Muslim religious identity of a character is measured through the use of religious rhetoric in language, visits of respected/holy religious locations, appearance in religio-cultural outfits, and religious backdrops. Embodiment included mini-episodes which contain discussions of any character about transgender bodies and their physical appearance. Social isolation includes contact of transgender characters with other characters. In this category, mini-episodes are included in which a transgender character was disowned by hir family, faced religious discrimination, was depicted as being sexually harassed, bullied, physically or psychologically victimized.

Table 1. TV shows

Year	TV Shows	Eng. Meaning	No of TG Roles	Network
2016-17	<i>Khuda mera bhi hai</i>	I am also believer	8	ARY Digital
2017	<i>Alif Allah aur Insan</i>	Alif Allah and human	5	Hum TV
2017-18	<i>Dil-e-Nadan</i>	Silly heart	1	Express Entertainment
2016	<i>Chandni</i>	Moonlight	6	Cine Combine
2017	<i>Bhaid Bhao</i>	Mysteries	4	TV One

RESULTS

Casting Transgender Characters

More often than not, roles of transgender characters would be performed by cisgender actors. In Pakistani Urdu dramas, casting cisgender actors for transgender roles is a common practice. This issue also exists in the Western media as well (Ulaby, 2014). In understudy research, out of 24 regularly appearing transgender roles, only one transgender actor, Kami Sid, performs a trans* role in the Urdu drama serial ‘*Dil-e-Nadan*’ (2017-18). She is the first transgender model who is cast for any trans* role in Urdu TV dramas (Images, 2017). Hir role as a ‘transgender waiter’ in the drama faces bullying and harassment while dealing with customers. In a small supporting role, the character appears in two mini-episodes (For details of TV shows see [Table 1](#)).

Drama serial *Khuda mera bhi hay* (2016-17) portrays eight transgender roles in which all of them are performed by cisgender actors. Out of 58 mini-episodes, 53 portray discussions about transgender. The drama revolves around an intersex child (Noor) and hir family. To present phases of age (i.e., baby, toddler, teenager, adult), the character of Noor is acted by four actors of different age groups. Furqan Qureshi performed as grown up Noor, which is the major phase of the role. The character, Babli appears along with two more speaking characters in traditional full-sleeved, loose eastern dresses. Full body feminine dresses are traditionally acceptable in the religious society of Pakistan. These characters are portrayed as singers and street dancers, but Babli changes her profession to a house-servant in the twelfth mini-episode. Another traditional *Khwaja sara* character of Sonia (*guru*) appears in thirty-fourth mini-episode.

The drama serial *Alif Allah aur Insan* (2017) showcases five supporting transgender characters (Shammo, Nurgis, Firdos, Neelam and Aslam) in the traditional profession of street dancing and singing. Shammo is a progressive transman. He falls in love with a nomadic girl, Rani, but she hates hir because of hir gender, timidity and stigmatized profession of *hijras*. He switches hir profession to please her and becomes a hairdresser/beautician. Hir role continues for forty-three mini episodes. There is another transman character, Aslam, also called Salma Bhai by females. He is an established beautician and owns a modern salon. He appeared in the fourth mini-episode and continued occasionally in nine different mini-episodes.

Chandni (2016) is a telefilm that focuses on the stigmatized life of Pakistani *hijras*. It presents six transgender roles. *Chandni* has a main role in this TV show. This role is performed by three different artists reflecting three different stages of hir life (i.e., newborn, teenager and adult). Three other transgender characters have typical roles of *Khwaja saras*. They are showcased in the relationship of ‘*Guru and chelas*’ as a family. All four characters show their presence throughout the data collection process. To depict the deprivation and segregation of the transgender community, location and sets are designed accordingly. This story is about a bisexual *person* who was disowned by hir family in childhood. After twenty years hir brother tries to bring hir back: however, his

Table 2. TV shows

TV Shows	Characters	Age Group	Actors	Identity
<i>Khuda mera bhi hai (KMBH)</i>	Noor (Young)	20-30	Cisgender	Genderqueer
<i>(KMBH)</i>	Noor (Tween)	8-12	Cisgender	Genderqueer
<i>(KMBH)</i>	Noor (Toddler)	2-4	Cisgender	Genderqueer
<i>(KMBH)</i>	Noor (baby)	0-1	Cisgender	Genderqueer
<i>(KMBH)</i>	Shabnum	20-30	Cisgender	Genderqueer
<i>(KMBH)</i>	Neelam	20-30	Cisgender	Genderqueer
<i>(KMBH)</i>	Sonia	35-50	Cisgender	Transwoman
<i>(AAAI)</i>	Firdos	20-30	Cisgender	Genderqueer
<i>(KMBH)</i>	Baban Mian	35-50	Cisgender	Transman
<i>Alif Allah aur Insan (AAAI)</i>	Shamo	20-30	Cisgender	Transman
<i>(AAAI)</i>	Aslam/Salma	20-30	Cisgender	Transman
<i>Bhaid Bhao (BB)</i>	Tasneem (Young)	20-30	Cisgender	Transman
<i>(BB)</i>	Tasneem (Teenager)	13-15	Cisgender	Transman
<i>(BB)</i>	Qaiser	35-50	Cisgender	Transman
<i>(BB)</i>	Sakina	35-50	Cisgender	Transman
<i>(KMBH)</i>	Babli	35-50	Cisgender	Transwoman
<i>(AAAI)</i>	Baji	35-50	Cisgender	Transwoman
<i>Dil-e-Nadan (DN)</i>	Kami	20-30	Transgender	Transwoman
<i>Chandni</i>	Chandni (Young)	20-30	Cisgender	Transwoman
<i>Chandni</i>	Chandni (Tween)	8-12	Cisgender	Transwoman
<i>Chandni</i>	Chandni (Baby)	0-1	Cisgender	Transwoman
<i>Chandni</i>	Guru /Ammi	35-50	Cisgender	Transwoman
<i>Chandni</i>	Shabnam	20-30	Cisgender	Transwoman
<i>Chandni</i>	Katari	20-30	Cisgender	Transwoman

brother's wife and other family members strongly oppose his decision. They stop him from having any relationship with a *hijra*. This is a realistically common story of *hijras* in Pakistan. They are largely disowned by their families which forces them to live a secluded and abandoned life. (Redding, 2012)

Lastly another group of three characters of this sample performed in a telefilm *Bhaid Bhao* (2017). This TV show brings out 'wrong body' discourse. The actors appear in 'Tomboy' roles. The lead character of Tasneem acts in a masculine way and does not feel any attraction towards opposite-sex males. The role of Tasneem is performed by two different teenager and grown-up artists. All three characters continue throughout the telefilm. In this data, all roles except one are performed by cisgender actors (For details of TV shows see [Table 2](#)).

Among these actors, there are many senior artists who gave their best performance; however, an artificiality and lack of authenticity can be seen in these roles. Availability of confident and talented transgender actors for these roles should be a consideration for TV directors.

Visibility of Transgender Characters

The presentation of transgender characters in different ways is more visible in Pakistani TV shows now in comparison to the past. Out of 265 mini-episodes, 124 mini-episodes showcased transgender characters in different roles (For details of TV shows see [Table 3](#)).

Table 3. TV shows

TV Shows	Mini-Eps / Show	Airtime in minutes	Appearance of TG in Mini-Eps	TG-Screen Time	%
<i>Khuda mera bhi hai</i>	58	1044	53	613	55.6%
<i>Alif Allah aur Insan</i>	96	1728	59	295	14.5%
<i>Dil-e-Nadan</i>	101	1818	2	10	.66%
<i>Chandni</i>	6	96	6	67	69.8%
<i>Bhaid Bhao</i>	4	58	4	48	84.2%
	265	4744min 79.06hr	124	1033min 17.22hr	21.8%

The total aired time of my sample was seventy-eight hours and twenty-five minutes. While the screen time for transgender characters was seventeen hours and twenty-two minutes, which is 21.8% of the total airtime. In telefilms, the percentage of visibility (69.8% and 84.2%) is better as compared to the percentage (55.6%, 14.5%, and 0.66%) in drama serials.

Identity and Transgender Characters

Transwomen characters have the highest visibility (39.13%) while genderqueer and transmen have equal frequencies (30.43% each). All characters belong to the same ethnicity which is Pakistani Asian. No other ethnicity is shown in these TV shows. As far as the age groups are concerned, portrayal of young adults and middle aged people is significantly higher than other categories of infants, toddlers, tweens and teenagers in TV shows throughout the data. Newborn babies are showcased in three mini-episodes. Tween characters are visible in two and a teenage character is in one mini-episode. The word *Hijra* is often used to identify the sex of majority characters. The term *Hijra* is considered derogatory in Urdu language that expresses transgender, eunuch, bisexual and hermaphrodite community of Pakistan. However, another terms *Khwaja sara* is also used interchangeably to express the same gender community.

In this sample, 91% of transgender characters express their religious identity as Muslim. The rest of the characters do not show any sign of their religious affiliation. The use of different verbal and nonverbal ideological codes are also noted. Frequent use of the words '*Khuda*', '*Allah*', '*Mashallah*', '*Allah ka shukar hai*', shots of mosque, prayer-mat, Quranic verses, *dhamal*, full-sleeve loose outfits of *hijras*, mystic background music, etc. depict an affinity and proximity between the *Khwaja sara* community and Pakistani religious society. Common beliefs, superstitions and myths associated with curse and blessings of eunuchs are discussed by using verbal signs of blessings, prayers, good-luck, bad-luck, curse, God's will, and divine power, etc. Religious identity of the characters is showcased in twenty-nine mini-episodes.

Although stories do not mainly focus on the sexual relationship of characters, the dramas reflect sexuality in a variety of ways. Noor has a crush on a girl (Sania) in the drama serial *Kuda mera bhi hay*. But after a short-term friendship, she leaves hir alone after knowing about hir's bisexuality. Another one-sided love story can be seen in the drama serial *Alif Allah aur Insan*. Shammo loves a nomadic heterosexual girl, Rani, but his gender (*hijra*) identity does not seem attractive to Rani. Tasneem, a tomboy and a lead character in telefilm *Bhaid Bhao* is forced to marry a suitor by his mother, but he strongly opposes the idea with the expression that a man cannot marry another man. In all five TV shows, the characters transgender identity is described through the conversation of cisgender characters. Transman roles use masculine pronouns to introduce themselves. No lesbian and gay characters are visible in this coded sample. Cisgender characters use degrading language for *Hijras* in forty-nine mini-episodes. It reflects the way *hijras* are discussed and treated in the Pakistani society. They are described as unclean, abnormal,

incomplete, ugly, beggars and prostitutes. Societal subjectivity of the *Khwaja sara* community appears to be the main point of drama narratives besides identity issues. Other problems of the transgender community like respect, education, employment, harassment, health care, disowning and infanticide of intersex babies are also depicted in variety of ways.

Embodiment and Transgender Characters

The narrative of “wrong body” discourse manifests in eleven mini-episodes through the dialogues of different characters. Most of the content is comprised through the expression of feelings, the inability to maintain any sexual relationship with the opposite sex, and the description of mental and physical body changes. Although some content focuses on medicalized explanatory accounts, the open discussion of genitalia is absent. In the sample, male characters are depicted more likely to discuss physical appearances and attractiveness of transgender characters. Eight mini-episodes reflect the visual images of transgender characters modifying their appearance by removing their facial hair, applying make-up and dressing like a modest female. Transformation to mannish styles is advised for transgender characters in nine mini-episodes. As Pakistan is a patriarchal society, the masculinity is more acceptable than femininity. So the parents want their intersex children to act like boys. They discourage their desire to play with dolls. Dr. Shershah, president of the Society of Gynecologists and Obstetricians of Pakistan, pointed out that generally parents disown their babies with ambiguous genitalia. However, if they decide to own such babies, they declare them as boys because there is a greater desire for sons in Pakistani patriarchal society (Anwer, 2015).

Social Isolation of Transgender Characters

In the social landscape of Pakistan, the oppressed *Khwaja sara* community is living a socially excluded life. Understudy data mainly depict social isolation/rejection of this community (eighty-nine mini-episodes). Their portrayal within their secluded homes and oppressed lifestyle in dramas is a true depiction of reality. Fifteen transgender characters in this data are disowned by their families. Fifty-nine mini-episodes depict the disrespectful social behavior towards *Khwaja saras*. Moreover, the sample depicts sexual harassment in nine mini-episodes and the use of derogatory language for trans* people in fifty-eight mini-episodes. Twenty-one mini-episodes discuss the stigmatized jobs of the *Khwaja sara* community. Commonly traditional *Khwaja saras* are presented as street dancers, singers and beggars in feminine garments with loud make-up. Shammo (in *Alif Allah aur Insaan*) and Noor (in the drama serial *Khuda mera bhi hai*) are shown as progressive transgender. Shammo starts his career from scratch as barber and gradually progresses to a make-up artist at the end. Noor’s father (Zain) envisages the stigmatized future of his hermaphrodite child and does not feel courage to face his family and friends discouraging and shameful remarks. Resultantly, he disowns and leaves the newborn at the *dera* of eunuchs. However, the baby’s mother (Mahagul) shows courage. Despite the strong social pressure and family opposition, she brings the child back and puts all her energies in his upbringing and education. After a long fight against social taboos and stereotypical norms, she proves that intersex children can be useful citizens in society. At the end of the drama, Noor appears as a successful businessman.

A sympathetic social attitude is also visible in thirty-seven mini-episodes. This attitude is sometimes full of kindness, but sometimes reflects pity on trans* people. In the drama serial *Dil-e-Nadan*, the restaurant manager shows the same feelings by feeding and employing a homeless transgender character, Kami. Similarly, in *Alif Allah aur Insaan*, a customer at the hairdresser’s shop gives Shammo some money for food, because he had

not eaten in the previous two days. As a philanthropist, Mikaeel's kind attitude towards orphans and especially towards Noor's education and upbringing depicts a silver lining in these shows.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that the visibility of trans* people has improved in Pakistani Urdu TV shows after the legal development about transgender rights in 2009. The improved visibility of transgender roles and characters on mainstream media is a positive sign of recognition for this community. From the perspective of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002; Dixon, 2001), television characterization, for example, portrayal of transgender in the roles other than stereotypical roles of street-dancing, singing and prostitution provide models for other members of trans*community. Young viewers commonly use these images to develop schemas about different types of jobs that are available for trans* people and the rest of the society. "Stereotypes are extremely persistent and often cloud the types of schemas that are developed by involvement with media particularly television" (as cited in Signorielli, 2009). When media showcase *Khwaja saras* in a limited variety of jobs, indirectly media reinforce a limited stereotypical set of occupations for *Khwaja saras*. That leads to shape people's perceptions towards aforementioned jobs for trans* community in the future.

During the last decade the Pakistani drama industry has produced a number of unconventional dramas on different topics and has broken the mold of the traditional depiction of transgender roles in its presentations. However, this change does not apply across the spectrum of LGBTQ identities. In social media, the content about gay and lesbian identities in the form of personal interviews and documentaries can be found, but they are totally invisible in the data for this study.

The nature of transgender issues in Pakistan is different than the issues of the Western LGBTQ community. Unlike Western queer narratives, Pakistani transgender individuals confront different multiple socio-religious challenges. They are still struggling for their basic human rights. Narratives about homosexuality, which are considered contrary to Islamic perspective are absent in the TV shows. Dramatists use religious rhetoric in their storylines to showcase paradoxical treatment to the fluid forms of sexualities in a Pakistani religious society. They use different verbal and nonverbal ideological signs to establish the *Khwaja sara* community's Muslim identity, which is an attempt to dissolve its alienation. Full sleeve traditional outfits, decent whirling dance moves, locations and sets of mosques and shrines, use of religious tropes, mystic background music and *alaap* of the Urdu word '*Mola*' which refers to God, are attempts to gain social and cultural immediacy. The symbolic name of the drama, '*Khuda mera bhi hey*' (I am also a believer) is a powerful ideological code which expresses a religious connotation to bridge the gap between believer *Khwaja saras* and the Muslim society.

The trans* narrative of "wrong body" discourse is still new for Pakistani small screen. Identifying as the opposite gender in contrast to the body is also a notion of subjectivity in Pakistani society. A wrongly gendered body experience is depicted by three main and supporting characters in a telefilm. It offers the common medical discourse of transsexualism ("WHO | World Health Report 2010," n.d.) and presents the feelings of discomfort with one's existing gender and inappropriate body. Pakistani patriarchal society is more lenient toward a female if she shows inclination towards masculinity; but having feelings of femininity for a male is considered disgraceful. Besides the accounts

about restlessness in an incongruous body structure, the corroboration of gender binary with masculinity or femininity is a common narrative of these TV shows.

Moreover, an activism for transgender rights is perceptible in this data. It is an effort to move from irreverence to a respectful social acceptance of a subjugated community. Pakistani television has started presenting transgender in a less conventional way and a variety in characterization is visible. In the past, characters were only used for entertainment as a “laughing stock” element; but now their real issues are discussed in dramas. They are depicted not only in stigmatized and blue-collar jobs, but are also showcased in white-collar professions.

Committing infanticide or disowning intersex children is a big social issue in Pakistan. It was addressed for the very first time on the big screen in a Pakistani Urdu feature film *Bol (Speak)* (2011) which gained much appreciation from its viewers. The movie targets the common patriarchal approach of Pakistani religious society in which sons are preferred over daughters and intersex children are rejected. The understudy sample of dramas also discuss the issue repeatedly through leading and supporting transgender roles. Every TV show of this sample somehow points out agonies and subjugation of the third gender which is close to reality. In reality, they are struggling for their basic human rights and respect. Societal deception and hypocrisy bars them from participating in the mainstream activities and brings stigma to their experiences in everyday life (Khan, 2014). A plethora of socio-economic and religious constraints pave the way to the adoption of a depraved and immoral lifestyle – mainly as a sex-worker or beggar (Abdullah et al (2012). Due to some moral and ethical restrains, dramatists indirectly discuss the issues related to sex. Although *Khwaja saras* are infamous for prostitution, the understudy sample depicts no transgender role as a sex-worker.

Drama serial *Khuda mera bhi hai* and telefilm *Chandni* specifically focus their stories of deprived intersex children and the secluded life of *Khwaja saras* in general. These shows change the conventional patterns of gender representation. They encourage society to stand against the predominantly patriarchal social institutions (Nisar, 2018) and discriminatory interpretation of gender-nonconforming individuals. The theme song of drama serial *Khuda mera bhi hai*, is the voice of an intersex child, who is the main focus in this drama. The song is three minutes’ in duration and is frequently played throughout all episodes. It is also used as background music during the story. Emotional lyrics and heart touching musical composition, make the song very appealing. The imagery of a child’s innocence is used in the lyrics to highlight the deprivation of a bisexual child’s joyful childhood. In a fictional dialogue with the mother, the child raises the questions of why he was disowned and pushed to a distant stigmatized world.

The improved visibility of non-conventional roles of transgender on Pakistani small screen after 2009 is perceptible in the data. The TV shows in this study have elicited the debates about gender-identity and human rights by portraying subjugation and social isolation of trans* community to improve conversations on discriminatory interpretation of incongruous body structure.

The major limitation of this study is a relatively small sample size. As Pakistani mainstream media has been neglecting the *Khwaja sara* community in past years, so their representation in current television programs is still miniscule. This is why no attempt is made to examine the specifically mainstream media content for the purpose of transgender studies. The current study is a pioneer work which focuses on the portrayal of transgender in Pakistani Urdu TV shows. This study relies upon the sample of available

TV shows in which transgender characters are presented in different ways. Overall, screen time of transgender characters is comparatively smaller than the actual airtime of the shows. Most of these characters in drama serials do not appear in every episode. In one drama serial, a transgender character appeared only twice. I believe that in the future, increased amount of data will lead towards better options of research. When the participation of transgender in mainstream media increases, I would recommend an exclusive quantitative /qualitative content analysis of *Khwaja sara* characters in Urdu TV drama serials focusing on their recognition and respect in the society. Another research focus could be news and advertising media to study the identity issues of the LGBTQ community. So far, the current study focuses only on TV shows of Urdu – the national language of Pakistan – but future researchers can include local languages. As drama is also popular in other provincial local languages – i.e., Punjabi, Saraiki, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi – researchers can explore transgender representation in those horizons as well. Scholars who have expertise in South Asian media can also compare their media content with Pakistani transgender portrayal to evaluate gendered lives in the region.

At present, transgender actors are almost invisible in mainstream Pakistani media. Unavailability of transgender artists push directors and producers to cast cisgender actors for *Khwaja sara* roles. Future participation of the *Khwaja sara* community in the entertainment industry can provide for better replacements of these roles. They can better demystifying transgender identity to the viewers who have little or no familiarity with them. Over all, these TV shows focus on the basic human rights of the Pakistani transgender community by highlighting their griefs and dispossessions. Despite the gloomy facts and figures, the growing activism against trans* discrimination and inequitable socio-economic and moral practices in the country is an encouraging sign for Pakistan's future.

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