

Title of Paper: “This is Where You Belong”—Shifting Representations of the Ideal Woman in Pakistani Television Serials from the 1980’s to the Present

Abstract:

A certain realism, and complexity of characterization of women, in earlier Pakistani television serials has made way for one-dimensional characters stereotyped along rigid dichotomies and understandings of traditional/Western, conservative/modern, religious/liberal, and good/evil. Limited functions and setting, along with the themes of present day plays, seem to focus on the idea that good women belong in the private sphere (i.e. at home). In earlier plays, by observing women’s interactions with others in *both* the privacy of the home and in the outside world, audiences were allowed a more in-depth look into these individuals’ complex psychology relative to all spheres of their lives.

Multiple factors are contributing to changes in the way women are represented in Pakistani television plays. With consumerism on the rise in Pakistan, class distinctions are perhaps becoming more distinctly visible and the socio-economic situation of the country demands that these issues be noted. The relationships between media censorship, liberalization, and representation, are complex and do not have a simple cause and effect explanation. International media, local news media and local entertainment media react and respond to each other but not necessarily in predictable ways.

Themes this paper draws on include these serials’ definitions of public/private spaces and the boundaries between them, the role of marriage and companionship, and the constant negotiation of tradition with the “modern.” Two broad factors explaining how these themes are tackled are: (i) state-media relations at the basic level of media censorship and liberalization and (ii) the intersection of state-media relations with popular piety culture and broader aspects of mainstream politics.

Through the lens of the representation of gender, I view how all these forces interact and how they influence popular culture.