



Redefining Identity: A Critical Analysis of Transgender Representation in *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of transgender individuals in the popular Pakistani drama series *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* (2016), aired on ARY Digital. The study investigates how Pakistani dramas portray the challenges faced by transgender people and advocate for gender equality. Using queer theory as a theoretical framework, the research analyzes how transgender characters are socially constructed and represented in Pakistani media. The study employs a descriptive qualitative research method, analyzing dialogues featuring transgender characters from YouTube. The character of Noor serves as a key focus, illustrating the real-life struggles of transgender individuals in society. The study adds to the larger conversation on gender inequality and media representation by demonstrating how television dramas can question and uphold social standards. The findings reveal that while *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* sheds light on the hardships faced by transgender people, it also perpetuates certain stereotypes, offering both a critique and a reflection of the real-life issues transgender individuals endure. This research provides important insights into the role of media in shaping public perceptions of gender and identity in Pakistan.



Introduction

Drama has always been an effective way to portray societal beliefs, conflicts, and tensions. The function of drama in portraying human problems is highlighted by Aristotle's emphasis that it mimics acts rather than executing them (Rayner, 1994). However, a man can't recognize himself

through the imperfect experiences of others therefore it not only explains the real-life events but describes those events through imitation of an action (Betti, 2015). According to Aristotle drama is an action in front of audiences in a threat and he also offered drama as a general term to describe forms of poetry, apart from that he identified different types of work within the same category, including tragedy and comedy (Kelly, 1993). In Pakistan, dramas were based on Urdu novels before 1969, but after that, many writers, including Farhat Ishtiaq and Umera Ahmad, started work on drama writing and serials (Khan et al., 2023). Pakistani dramas started in late 1960 in the written form of Urdu. After many years in particular the decade of 1970 to 1980 has gained national popularity. Therefore, that period got a reputation as the “golden age” of Pakistani dramas (Ahmed, 2015). Wahab (2019) explained that the main focus of Pakistani dramas is to portray religious, social, and power dynamics and women protagonists through serials, particularly Gen Zia Ul Haq military regime (1978-1988).

The study's importance stems from its addition to the expanding corpus of knowledge regarding gender representation in Pakistani media. Through an analysis of *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*, this study provides insights into the representation of transgender individuals in popular entertainment and the social consequences of this portrayal (Hussain, et al., 2024). Additionally, reflections on the role of the media in encouraging pluralistic narratives and reducing prejudice towards under-represented groups are informed by the research. This study discusses the aforementioned issues in a way that encourages a media climate that facilitates social justice and gender equality (Akrivos, et al., 2020).

This research bridges the gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* and its impact on the representation of transgender people in Pakistani media. While transgender individuals are increasingly making appearances in the media, nothing is known about how they are represented in Pakistani television shows. The absence of educational opportunities and unemployment are two of the several ways through which this group is oppressed, which compels the Pakistani Khwaja Sara community into stigmatized vocations (Riaz, 2023). Research in the past has focused on the general issues of gender inequality and media influence on how individuals perceive marginalized groups (Lindsey, 2020). In addition, while some studies have examined how gender is represented in Bollywood and Western media, less attention has been given to the specific discourses and narratives in Pakistani dramas (Gershon, 2021).

This study has adopted a theoretical framework for studying the representation of transgender people in Pakistani dramas queer theory. Queer theory highlights how gender and sexuality are constructed socially and challenges traditional gender norms (Terrell, et al., 2012). It posits that cultural institutions often impose binary categorizations that exclude non-conforming individuals and that identities are fluid rather than fixed (Todd, 2005). This research examines whether or not the drama supports or resists Pakistani society's conventional gender norms and how it constructs transgender identity. Also, queer theory allows for power relations to be critically examined, as well as the media's impact on popular gender diversity discourses (Ghalzai, 2020). This study aims to investigate how Pakistani TV shows present transgender identity and how framing techniques affect the presentation.

It also evaluates how well these dramas reflect the life of transgender people in reality and to what extent they support gender equality (Chaudhary, 2021). The research examines how Pakistani plays reflect transgender identities, how real their lives are, and to what extent Pakistani plays are supporting the narrative of gender equality to reach there (Ali, et al., 2024).

Literature Review

Davidson (2020) analyzes the application of queer theory in literary studies, highlighting how it clashes with identity categories. Queer Theory initially dismisses static sexual identities and subsequently condemns the assimilationist inclinations of mainstream LGBTQ movements. However, literary studies have increasingly re-examined identity categories, acknowledging their cultural and historical significance. In contrast to its promotion of fluidity and anti-identitarianism, queer theory derives its worth from identity categories. He highlighted how queer literary criticism has moved away from analyzing identity but now rethinks its political and analytical value. This evolving discussion is illuminated by the constant balancing act between representation, identity, and queerness in literature.

The Khwaja Sara group is being oppressed in several ways, such as inadequate work opportunities and a lack of professional and educational resources, which is why they are becoming stigmatized professions (Azhar, et al., 2024). Dilley (1999) has worked on queer theory, which emphasizes identity fluidity and opposes binary gender and sexuality classifications. It examines how literature portrays marginalized identities, such as transgender people, and challenges the power structures that influence social standards. These concepts are applied in education by queer pedagogy, which encourages inclusivity. This approach is crucial in analyzing transgender representation in literary studies. The idea emphasizes intersectionality, recognizing the role of culture, ethnicity, and class in the creation of gender identity. It also looks at identity as performative and ever-changing. There are also few media studies in Pakistan context that gives us the view of critical discourse analysis such as Khan et al. (2017) deconstructs the ideological discursivity in print media advertisements. Ramzan and Khan (2019) studied the stereotyped ideological constructions of nawabs. Bhutto and Ramzan (2021) evaluated the verses of Quran, gender issues and feminine injustice in print media discourse. Ramzan et al. (2021) studied comparatively newspaper headlines and found out power agenda there. Nawaz et al. (2021) studied language representation and ideological stance in Brauhi language by comparing it with Urdu and English language and found significant results. Ramzan et al. (2021) studied politics as rhetoric by analyzing discourse in politicians' statement and concluded they are determined for personal interests.

Mayo (2007) has discussed, intersectionality is crucial to comprehending queer identities because it highlights how identity categories like race, gender, and sexual orientation are interrelated rather than distinct. By showing how race affects the visibility and acceptability of gay people in various contexts. He has challenged the presumption of Whiteness within LGBT identity frameworks. The study also investigates the ways in which White queer and heterosexual societies discriminate against LGBT youth of color. Some queer teenagers establish alternative networks inside racialized communities for support, while others disguise themselves as heterosexual in specific settings to escape marginalization. He also mentioned the story of Fred Martinez Jr. Two-Spirit young man, to highlight this complexity. His identity was both acknowledged and misinterpreted throughout culture and politics. Ultimately, intersectionality in queer studies shows that identity is context-dependent rather than fixed.

Sherrill, & Hardesty (1994) discovered that harassment on campus caused 33% of lesbian, homosexual, and bisexual persons to leave the academy. According to D'Augelli (2003), 39% of lesbian and bisexual female youth reported having attempted suicide, and 69% of them had suicidal thoughts. Victimization occurred because sexual inclination was comparatively high in this group, with 75% reporting spoken abuse, 13% reporting substantial abuse, and 12% reporting sexual abuse. Additionally, according to Rankin (2003), 41% of respondents did not believe that

their organization was addressing gender identity and sexual preference issues in its policies and practices. A more thorough investigation of BPFQ students' experiences and observations of their site atmosphere is essential, as evidenced by the observation of homophobia, harassment, and victimization of LGBTQ individuals in university settings.

Naseer, et al., (2020) have examined the issues and difficulties that transgender people encountered in society and critically examined how transgender people were portrayed in a few films. Fit-up and Queer theory serves as a theoretical framework for this study. To analyze the data, surveys, in-depth interviews, and content analysis have been gathered. They concluded that transgender representations in Bollywood films are stereotyped on social media. Bollywood films depict transgender people as dancers, sex workers, and beggars. Instead, then advocating for their societal claims, which include health and intellectual health difficulties, joblessness, and many other issues, they portray transgender people as humorous characters. Bollywood films use humor and amusement to portray transgender people as a disrespectful generation. Naeem, & Khushi (2021) researched two plays, *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* and *Alif Allah Aur Insan* (ARY Digital & HUM TV), which demonstrated the ability to shape views towards minority classes and behaviors through scripted entertainment. A code sheet on transgender topics that were emphasized in these two chosen plays from two separate networks was investigated and created. More negative sentiments regarding transgender characters and their problems were linked to stories that featured transgender characters. The more conservative television viewers observed transgender individuals represented in the media, the more positive their attitudes became. The results distinctly suggested how entertainment content can impact individuals' perception of minority groups.

Khuda Mera Bhi Hai, a Pakistani television drama, is extremely relevant to queer studies because it defies gender stereotypes and emphasizes the plight of transgender people in a conservative society (Kanwal, 2020). This study provides in-depth analysis of how transgender representation in the Pakistani drama *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*. By depicting the life of a mother raising a transgender child, the drama raises awareness of the identity crises, discrimination, and social stigma to which the transgender community in Pakistan is exposed. Its message is in support of tolerance and acceptance and against rigid gender binary distinctions, which is in line with queer theory.

Research Methodology

This study critically examines the representation of transgender characters on the Pakistani drama series *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* and analyzes how the plot challenges or reinforces social stereotypes. The study explains the representation of gender identity, issues of challenges faced by transgender people, and the role of media representation in shaping the attitude of people. Given the increasing influence of television dramas in shaping the discourse of society, this study claims to examine if *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* supports inclusiveness or promotes convention. By examining the plot of the drama, the character of the people involved, and their interactions, the study ascertains the show's contribution toward shaping the attitude against transgender individuals in Pakistan.

The study is qualitative, and textual and visual analysis of the play is the primary data source. Rigorous content analysis is conducted by examining key scenes, focusing on dialogues, character interactions, and visual presentation. Secondary data are also collected from journal articles, media critiques, and interviews with trans activists and media professionals to gather contextual data. Audience reception is also taken into consideration by looking at online discussions, social media comments, and reviews to observe how different viewers perceive the representation of

transgender subjects through the drama. The mixed modes of data gathering help with the construction of a general understanding of the impact of the drama.

The data is understood through thematic analysis, identifying major themes in line with transgender depiction, discrimination, societal acceptance, and gender identity issues. Large scenes and quotes are examined in order to present implicit and obvious messages about transgender individuals. Comparative analysis is used to identify similar or dissimilar ways in which the drama representation is compared with real-life encounters of transgender individuals in Pakistan. Further, audience responses are categorized to ascertain whether the drama successfully challenges or reinforces prejudice. The findings are discussed in the light of contemporary media theory, providing a critique of television's contribution to shaping society's attitudes.

The studies are informed by media representation theories, namely representation theory by Stuart Hall which deals with how media create social meaning. The study employs Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity when studying how gender identity is represented and performed in the drama. The study of intersection of class, religion, and culture along with transgender identity in Pakistani society has been studied through intersectionality theory. Through examining these theoretical frameworks, *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai* can be critically examined on how it helps to reinforce or negate dominant constructions of a transgender person.

The study integrates these frameworks to provide a nuanced analysis of the way the drama presents transgender people and the implications for media, gender identity, and social change in Pakistan.

Discussion and Analysis

The chapter on data analysis focuses on the linguistic, narrative, and visual encoding of transgender identity in the text *based on* the representation of the character Noor in *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*. The analysis, pursuing a qualitative descriptive method, endeavors to understand how transgender identity is produced in the drama and additionally what degree it echoes or clashes with heteronormative and binary gender discourse in Pakistani television. Based on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this chapter looks at many dialogues, the character encounters, and the narrative forms. The findings were placed within wider discourses of gender and sexuality in South Asia, with special reference to how transgender individuals are represented on Pakistani television. This chapter proposes to explore the consequences of such representation for social knowledge about transgender individuals and their visibility in mainstream media through a critical analysis of how Noor's character is developed and discusses Noor on an identity level.

Dialogue 1

English translation	Dialogue in Urdu
"Principal: It is not good for Noor either. Think about yourself; If you go anywhere in the world to fill out Noor's form, ... one for men and one for women. There will never be a third option."	بارے اپنے ہے۔ نہیں اچھا بھی لیے کے نور یہ: پرنسپل دنیا لیے کے کرنے پر فارم کا نور آپ اگر سوچو۔ میں گے، ملین آپشن دو صرف کو آپ تو جائیں بھی کہیں میں کوئی لیے۔ کے خواتین ایک اور لیے کے مردوں ایک گا ہو نہیں کبھی آپشن تیسرا
(Khuda Mera Bhi Hai, 2016, Ep-09)	(خدا میرا بھی ہے، قسط نمبر 09)

This passage of the drama reflects the censure and ostracism that transgendered people suffer from society. This denial of the principal to admit Noor for the lack of an option of a 'third' gender is when transgendered people are denied the most fundamental rights such as education as well as entry to a binary gender system. Transgender children are rejected by society, and by their own families, and do not get love and affection, and emotional trauma and isolation result. It illustrates how transgender people are discriminated against as early as one year old preventing them from living openly too like other children. Gender performativity deeply instills the need to shatter such rigid norms and sanction a more open and inclusive space for transgender people.

Dialogue 2

English translation	Dialogue in Urdu
<p>“Noor: Is my face terrible that you can't see me? Do I have leprosy that you can't touch me? Am I a low cast, a badass? ... People accept their illegitimate children too, but I am your own”.</p> <p>(Khuda Mera Bhi Hai, 2016, Ep-15)</p>	<p>دیکھ سفر میری آپ جو ہوں کا شکل بھیانک میں کیا: نور بھی چھو مجھے آپ جو ہے کور مجھے کیا رہی؟ نہیں آپ کیا کیوں ہوں؟ کمینا ہوں، نہیں میں کیا سکتی؟ نہیں نجیز اپنی تو لاگ ارے دیجیے، جواب ایسا؟ ساتھ میرے کی آپ بھی پھر سے میں ہیں دیتے لینے اپنا بھی کو اولاد سے۔ خوشی</p> <p>(15 نمبر قسط ہے، بھی میرا خدا)</p>

The dialogue is “is my face terrible that you cannot see me?” 'I catch leprosy that you cannot look after me?', was what she asked my friend and me.' It is a true picture of the harsh reality women go through in society as they identify themselves as transgender individuals. The psychological scars caused by rejection come to light in Noor's heartbreaking story of father rejection in *Khuda Mera Hai*. When Noor was born her father Zain refused to recognize her; she is transgender and this mimics how trans people are rejected from birth by society. In their questions, Noor makes it clear how they are excluded and dehumanized. Although her father rejects her, her mother, Mahi, accepts her, giving of her love in a society where society is quick to push transgender people out. Rejecting, gender inequality and the emotional price of being excluded is what this dialogue shows.

Dialogue 3

English translation	Dialogue in Urdu
<p>The ground boys: can you play a game? Can you be able to run, Dhanu? Look, friends! His eyes were full of tears. Did not your mother tell you that football is played by men?</p> <p>(Khuda Mera Bhi Hai, 2016, Ep-13)</p>	<p>تم کیا ہیں؟ کھیل کھیل ایک آپ کیا: بوائے گراؤنڈ اس دوستو دیکھو دھنو؟ ہو، سکتے ہو قابل کے نے دوڑ والدہ کی آپ کیا تھیں۔ ہوئی بھری سے آنسوؤں آنکھیں کی کھیلا ذریعہ کے مردوں بال فٹ کہ بتایا نہیں کو آپ نے ہے؟ جاتا</p> <p>(خدا میرا بھی ہے قسط 13)</p>

The dialogue further *reveals* the trans people's ridicule and exclusion. As for this particular scene, the transgender character of this scene, Noor is ridiculed and mocked by a gang of boys simply because he is a man. Boys' jeers are indicative of a society in which certain activities, like playing soccer, are legally, traditionally, and socially prevented by just men. That encounter shows the disrespect and discrimination transgender people generally face because society shames them for not being binary genders. Transgender people like Noor should have similar rights and opportunities as every single individual but unfortunately, they are inferior and they are mostly invisible. Here, too, he talks of equality and violation of basic human rights faced by transgenders.

Dialogue 4

English translation	Dialogue in Urdu
"Mother-in-law: With great difficulty, I got rid of that boy and now I do not want to hear his name in this house" (Khuda Mera Bhi Hai, 2016 Ep-18).	بڑی مشکل سے میں نے اس لڑکے سے ساس چھٹکارا حاصل کیا اور اب میں اس گھر میں اس کا نام نہیں سننا چاہتی۔ (خدا میرا بھی ہے قسط 13)

The dialogue "With great difficulty, I got rid of that boy and now I do not want to hear his name in this house" reflects the intense societal and familial rejection faced by transgender individuals and their families. In this case, Mahi, Noor's mother, faces relentless criticism from her mother-in-law for raising a transgender child. The conversation reveals that society blames the mother for her child's sex while in most cases, acquitting the father, Zain, of all blame. Mahi has to bear the family and societal expectations alone, and even when she tries to get her child things that would contribute to his good life, she is severely blamed. Her decision to eventually leave her husband and family to secure a better future for Noor illustrates the harsh reality that, in many cases, women bear the burden of society's prejudices. This reflects how women, especially mothers of transgender children, are disproportionately criticized and held accountable for issues that are beyond their control, while men often escape such scrutiny.

Dialogue 5

English translation	Dialogue in Urdu
Principal: The children I am talking about are not special; I am talking about the middle class of children who are known as Hijra in common language. (Khuda Mera Bhi Hai, 2016, Ep-18)	وہ ہوں رہا کر بات کے بچوں جن میں پرنسپل کے بیچ ہوں رہا کر بات میں ہیں، نہیں کڈر سپیشل میں ہیں۔ کہتے بیجڑا میں زبان عام کو جن کو، بچوں بھی میرا خدا) "گی۔ ہوں حیران لوگ آپ ہوں جانتا ہے (خدا میرا بھی ہے قسط 18)

The dialogue, "The children I am talking about are not special; I am talking about the middle class of children who are termed as Hijra in common parlance," accounts for the grossly entrenched misconceptions about transgender individuals in society. Noor, a trans boy, here exposes the social prejudices and misconceptions that brand individuals like him as "different" or "abnormal." Though his father, Zain, rejects him for not playing along with gender stereotypes, Noor's observation gets at the brutal truths about transgender children, who are most likely to be excluded and misrepresented. This discussion brings out the fight that transgender individuals face to assert their identity in a society that perceives them as inferior or unnatural. The role of media, like dramas, in fighting these stereotypes is the way they raise awareness and bring about a shift in the public's mindset. Noor's battle against social inequality and discrimination is typical of the overall struggle that transgender individuals face to be embraced, treated with respect, and given equal rights.

Dialogue 6

English Translation	Urdu dialogue
<p>“Noor: I am worried Aniya is worried about himself. ... think that I am a girl, why is it happening to me, why do I think I am isolated from everyone?”</p> <p>(Khuda Mera Bhi Hai, 2016, Ep-18)</p>	<p>فکر مند میں بارے اپنے انیا کہ ہے تشویش مجھے: نور بے لگتا مجھے کبھی. ہوں بہن یا بھائی کا آپ میں ہے۔ ایک میں کہ ہوں سوچتا کبھی اور ہوں لڑکا میں کہ مجھے ہے، رہا ہو کیوں ایسا ساتھ میرے ہوں، لڑکی ہوں؟ تھلگ الگ سے سب میں کہ ہے لگتا کیوں</p>

The discussion in which Noor talks about how he feels and experiences emotions brings out the deeper inner battle and insecurity transgendered people face during the development process. Noor reminds us of the gender confusion of most transgender children, energized by the rejection of society and being mocked. Noor begins to wonder what his actual gender identity is when he overhears kids not laughing at him in the game of football. The psychological pain of being suspended between two worlds, neither male nor female and the loneliness associated with that come to life in the dialogue. As this situation stands for Noor, her mother, Mahi, also needs to help Noor understand who he is, because this is a problem enforced by society that does not accept transgender individuals on top of Noor's father, Zain, not helping her. Fueled by this systemic transphobia against people who are or identify as trans, people who are trans continue to be denied basic rights like education, health care, and most importantly identity recognition and affirmation making the internalized confusion and unawareness chronic. In the dialogue, transgender people's vulnerability is unearthed as they try to make sense of the world around them that is more aligned to denying their existence and marginalizing their experiences.

Conclusion

Through the study of the dialogues selected from Khuda Mera Bhi Hai the harsh realities that transgender face in society is found in their participation in establishing gender identity, the social acceptability, and the emotional price that he has to pay for the undesirability. By the Noor character, the drama presents how transgenders undergo composite trajectories of the exploration of self and of acute isolation that is usually a result of social rejection and stereotyping. From the

above discourse, it is evident that transgender persons are made fun of, emotionally abandoned, and denied basic rights such as education and social inclusion, because when they have an inherent human dignity. Noor's problems are individual but signify a larger issue with society in that transgender identities are excluded and their rights are consistently overlooked.

Furthermore, the play highlights the overriding theme of acceptance by family, namely that of Noor's mother, Mahi, who, in contravention of social restrictions and rejection by her family, chooses to remain with her daughter. This embrace and love differentiate from the disregard and rejection shown to Noor by other relatives and society, as a whole, emphasizing the paramount importance of empathy and comprehension in accepting transgender individuals. The article further notes the key contribution of the media in raising awareness of the struggles faced by transgender people and calling for change in people's attitudes to a culture of acceptance and equalization.

The study indicates that there is a need to tear down the societal norms that breed discrimination against transgenders. Through education, awareness, and an open and inclusive society, there is promise for a better future where transgender individuals are no longer regarded as "abnormal" but are treated like everybody else and afforded the same opportunities, rights, and respect. The description of Noor's narrative acts as a reminder of empathy, compassion, and action in producing a more equitable society for the diversity of gender identities.

Based on the findings of this research, corresponding major recommendations come to light regarding bettering the well-being and living conditions of transgenders generally, in line with the needs illustrated in *Khuda Mera Bhi Hai*. Primarily, it is essential to address the awareness level and perceptions among society members about gender diversity. Knowledge-based campaigns on removing false images of transgenders from minds can play an important role in reducing widespread generalizations and stigma against them. Schools, colleges, and mass media need to take proactive steps toward promoting empathy and inclusiveness, bringing out the lived experiences of transgender people to minimize societal prejudices.

Further, governments must make sure that they enact and enforce laws that protect the rights of trans individuals. Ensuring access to education, health, and employment opportunities and safeguarding them against discrimination on the basis of gender identity will go a long way in affirming their inherent human rights. Additionally, support from family members plays an important role in the development of trans children. Parents should be provided with adequate resources and counseling so that they are able to better comprehend their children's gender and offer emotional and psychological support during their journey.

Lastly, the media must also take the responsibility of giving more realistic and positive representation of transgender individuals, eschewing the negative stereotypes and offering a diverse and true representation. By creating safe spaces and facilitating community integration, society can ensure that transgender individuals break their struggles while fighting for tolerance and integration for all.

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