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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Women Portrayal in Contemporary Pakistani Films**

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**ABSTRACT**

Media became the strong force in shaping and making global village. Cinema is the source of making cultural and traditional norms specifically gender based. Pakistani Cinema faces different phases while it's developing stages. In the current era, it has been revived and focus on important aspects of society. This study aims to find the women portrayal in contemporary Pakistan films that how their depiction has been changed from docile being towards empowered roles who challenged the patriarchal ideologies and struggled for their rights. It works to highlight the women portrayal in contemporary Pakistani films that either it reinforce the gender stereotypes or present them in strong characters. The women portrayal before revived cinema did not address the women's issues by representing them docile and dependent creature. The inattentive address on women's concerns was the main reason of Pakistani cinema down fall. After the revival, Pakistani films emphasize on women's portrayal by presenting their problems and positive image. It is a qualitative study and critical discourse analysis applied to see the focus of women's portrayal in-depth in the contemporary films based on themes. The results shows that contemporary Pakistani films promoting women's strong place in the society and making contributions towards their positive portrayal by discussing their issues and presenting struggles of them in the male dominated culture. The women in this film era achieve their goals towards empowerment and cross the hurdles of societal pressures. This study focuses on the feminist discourse in contemporary cinema regarding women portrayal that would develop more balanced gender portrayal in films to educate and contemplate the viewers. The research opens new avenues for cinema research and would benefit women in society by reducing patriarchal practices. It will also facilitate in policy making of cinema goers to come up with such productions that provide balanced gender portrayals and use this medium effectively to address the women's issues existing in Pakistan.

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**KEYWORDS** Contemporary, Pakistani Films, Women Portrayal

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**Introduction**

Cinema is a strong medium around the world to transmit culture and present the societal values in an effective way. The films produce show the real ideology of that society as Buckland (2011) stated that all films produce show the real presentation of ideologies.

Laura Mulvey (1975) worked on the Visual pleasure and Narrative cinema. In which she described that how film industry is dominated by males in terms of audience and directors. They produced and watched that films which highlight the role of women

as object. She said that Hollywood cinema visually satisfied the male desires through male gaze and respond to the fascination that are women centered. Therefore, the films produced in Pakistan presented the socially accepted male dominance and prevailed ideology of socially constructed gender-based roles.

Pakistani contemporary cinema is shifted from traditional trends to the new dimensions to meet the criteria of latest media needs. After revival of Pakistani cinema in 2007 (Khan, 2016), the visible change in the storylines and production technique were visible. The contemporary films address the issues of society and gender. It is a very prominent shift in Pakistani cinema from its historical perspective of gender roles. In the early era of cinema, women are presented in submissive roles and men as authoritative. The themes covered in that era were domestic violence, societal pressures, patriarchal system and family honor. The change in political system also affected the cinema ideologies. Gender roles were portrayed in a way that reinforced conservative pattern of traditional values and women idealization were presented as caretakers. Women were represented as virtuous mothers, loyal wives and dutiful daughters, who defied these roles were portrayed as negative. Heroism was connected with masculinity and men embodying traits saviors, strength and honor. The gradual shift of challenging gender roles was depicted in early 2000 but these narratives are limited and prioritize with traditional norms. Pakistani cinema has made efforts to re-defining gender roles but rooted in cultural norms of societal structures, still the progressive portrayals are needed to address the gender dynamics realities in Pakistan (Hussain, S. 2009).

The contemporary films are presenting women with resilience abilities and strength towards their progress. Whereas stereotypes are still presented with women roles that shown their connections with traditional structures existed in the society like women as victims rely on men figures for conflict resolution. Feminist movements have influenced the cinema portrayal based on gender and these added significant impact on narratives in Pakistani cinema. Through these efforts the topics like gender discrimination, demonization, domestic violence, sexual assault and women rights are addressed in films. The gender dynamics are presented in film industry which shows the shift of gender roles representation from traditional norms to the progressiveness that influenced the societal behaviors towards women with the contemporary works of Pakistani cinema (Khan, A. 2017).

Yousaf (2020) studied the women portrayal in film industry over years and traced the shift from the subdued, passive characters towards the strong and independent characters by showing their confrontation of issues like sexual abuse, domestic violence, self-realization and family dynamics. Films are unique genre in the transmission of important content. Nawaz (2019) explored the contemporary cinema and found that evolving depiction of gender roles, societal norms and quest of self-identity changing the sociopolitical scenario. The latest films present cultural discourse of Pakistani society.

The evolving trend of feminist narratives in contemporary Pakistani films has been emphasis on women rights, dignity and struggles against patriarchal structures. The selected films are from 2015-2020 timeline and this is considered the revived cinema era. The films *Ho Mann Jahan*, *Verna*, *Parwaz Ahi Junoon*, *Load wedding* and *Superstar* are the films that achieved praise from viewers and jury along with high box office collection. These films feature complex women characters who are dealing with societal challenges and struggling for their identities.

Pakistani film industry has been revised since 2007. (Khan, 2016). Its focus is now on important themes and major issue of the society like male chauvinism, corruption, women issues and cultural norms. (Yousaf, Adnan, & Aksar, 2017). Women portrayal remain the major concern in the cinema. This study aimed to highlight the change in women portrayal in contemporary cinema of Pakistan and how they challenged the traditional stereotypical approaches.

## **Literature Review**

As films represent the ideologies of gender existed in the society, so this medium inculcates traditions regarding gender-based roles. Films based on gender concerns are famous all over the world. Gender explains the roles, characteristics of men and women in the society (Kite, 2001). The women are portrayed in the cinema to address their issues, but male dominated content underscores this purpose. The cinema narrative regarding feminist approach analyzed gender dynamics on screens (Schiele et al., 2020).

In cinema, the women were presented in limited roles in their cultural boundaries. They have been represented as dependent on males for emotional and economic support (Parvez & Roshan, 2010). The men are considered dominant in the society and have rights of decision making whereas women are shown as weak, docile and dependent creature. In most cases, there are not concepts in films those centered the women. The men are more depicted as main leads than women (Butt, 2012). This trend reinforces women portrayal in cinema as fragile, submissive and weak. Gender stereotypes are also the essential component of media content. Film in this regard shaped gender stereotypes (Alcolea-Banegas, 2009; Moghadam, 2007). Pakistani cinema served the interest of men and follow patriarchal ideologies in storylines. The women characters are portrayed in the films as subordinate of men for their interests with no autonomous existence (Khan & Ahmed, 2016). This portrayal actually spread negativity in the society and re enforce negative perceptions of viewers. The important topics were missed in cinema, and it's lost the impact. Pakistani cinema also followed this trend of male narratives and get criticism on concept, storylines and gender stereotypes approach (Kalsoom, 2015).

In the contemporary cinema of Pakistan, the trend has been shifted from subjugate portrayal of women to the empowered roles. Although Pakistani films of contemporary cinema has changed the women image as affirmative and empowered but still subjugation is there and stereotypes overcame (Ali & Ayesha, 2015). The portrayal of strong women is taken as assertive and demonized because they have taken against their traditional rules. The cultural boundaries and patriarchal ideologies suppress the concept of liberal feminism. The revived concepts in Pakistani cinema grasp the attention of public and it is clearly visible that women issues are centered in the plot of films. The change is started from dependent portrayal of women towards independent roles by challenging patriarchal systems and struggles for their rights. Women are given empowered status with their depictions as strong and determined human beings who are excelled in all spheres of life (Bushra & Wajiha, 2013).

In the contemporary Pakistani films, the feminist narrative is center in themes. The storylines are revolves around the diverse and real depictions of Pakistani women. Selvam and John (2017) stated that feminist narrative in the films focus on the self image of women along with the emphasis on their issues. The films address the concerns of women's self identity is an effort towards the development as in Pakistani society women comprised of more than 50% population. The feminism views are supported by feminist

movements and there worked affect the women's strong placements in the media. Liberal feminism is applied in the women portrayal in Pakistani contemporary cinema. Liberal feminism provides social structures that facilitates women strong positions along with the increased opportunities for them (Macionis, 2018). The women issues are emphasized with the advocacy of their rights in the cinema that depicted the positivity of the society at large level. Li (2018) found that focus of feminist narratives in Pakistani films supported filmmakers to work on feminist practices in the storylines that connected global feminism concerns and cultural values of locally issues of femineity. It adds new dimension in the women portrayal to make progressive ideals for them and represent credible feminist ideologies in contemporary films.

Pakistani cinema present multifaceted depictions of women in its films. There is no consistency in the storyboard and topics as cinema present different aspects of women in their life spheres. But it is most visible in the films that stereotypical representation of the women are undermined. The contemporary films focus on the issues relevant to the women lives and incorporated topics that support empowerment, gender inequality, rights and brakeage of patriarchal norms (Van et al. 2017).

Women portrayal challenged the patriarchal norms. It was resisted by particular groups of filmmakers and presented feminist narratives in cinema with deeply rooted stereotypical presentations. The revived cinema succeeded with unique topics based on male chauvinism, women rights and social issues. So this wave created friction between traditional norms and evolving dynamics in the society. This is manifested in contemporary Pakistani films that gender equality concerns have been depicted as part of social norm (Nizami, 2023). This trend moves the women representations from passive and docile roles to the strong individuals in diverse ways.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Feminist Film Theory**

The feminist film theory deals with the placement and roles of women in the films. Films address the concerns of gender. This theory came after the work of several prominent feminist theorist s among them Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis and Kaja Silverman added marvelous contributions in the women portrayal on media in this regard. The second wave of feminist movement gave rise to feminist film theory by mentioning women passive characters in films. It discusses women image that are stereotyped, male gaze and circumstances of feminist counter cinema. This movement advocate for women strong roles, their right and protection against gender discriminations of equal rewards in the industry. The theory focuses on the repression of patriarchy against women in all spheres. Its bring the attention towards the placement and roles of women characters with their strong narratives in the films (Smelik, 1998).

The feminist film theory is appropriate for this study as Ho Mann Jahan, Verna, Parwaz Hai Junoon, Load Wedding and Superstar can be described as feminist films. The films stories of the contemporary Pakistani cinema centered the women roles and emphasized on their struggles towards their rights. These are based on the doctrines of feminist film theory. The most women characters presented in the films are breaking stereotypes and making their image strong.

## **Material and Methods**

Qualitative research approach has been employed in this study to do the in-depth analysis of content and the women portrayal in contemporary cinema of Pakistani films. In this approach, the data collected and analyzed by using the critical discourse analysis method. Critical discourse analysis has main approach to focus on the relationship between power, discourse and ideology (Wodak, 2009). This method was suitable to find the actual depiction of women along with the ideology presented in the films. The films, *Ho Mann Jahan*, *Verna*, *Parwaz hai Junoon*, *Load Wedding* and *Superstar* were critically analyzed from the contemporary cinema of Pakistan from 2016-2020. The selected films are based on the women-based themes along with high grossing profit in the specific mentioned five years which era is considered the established revived cinema of Pakistan. So successful films were produced before Covid in these years. There are many issues presented in these films like feminism, patriarchy, women rights, marital issues and societal pressures. This study emphasized on women portrayal along with their issues in terms of language interpretations and hegemonic narrative.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Ho Mann Jahan**

*Ho Mann Jahan* is film released in 2016 and is directed By Asim Raza. It revolves around the lives of three friends who are passionate about music, but unhidden the dichotomy of society that they are confronting the youth for their pursuits of dreams. The film depicted women's struggles towards their identities particularly in artistic fields between personal accomplishments and traditional values.

### **Themes of the film**

*Ho Mann Jahan* shows different significant themes that shape the film narrative. The key themes are given below to explore the film's message.

### **Women Empowerment and Gender Equality**

The film's narrative centered on the empowerment of women that how being an individual became successful by empowering themselves that in return developed the society. It depicted the women pursue their careers positively in arts and music as these are overshadowed in societal pressures. The film showed the journey of women's struggles towards their career passions. It portrayed the women challenging the assigned roles to them by society and combatting for their individuality. The conflict between personal aspirations and social pressures is presented. The lead character Manizeh's issues were addressed in the film that how traditional gender roles constrained the women's career choices. Women's efforts in conservative society were depicted by trying to balance their careers and family lives. The film advocated for the women rights and their choices for living.

### **Restrictive Gender Roles in Societal Norms**

The film emphasized the societal norms that limited freedom and opportunities based on gender. Manizeh and other women characters faced pressures from family and society to remain in the women traditional roles as daughter, wife and daughter -in-law. Music and arts are considered unconventional careers in our culture so these are not appreciated for women. The women characters suppress the individual dreams based on gender roles in the film, but it also focusses on their strivings to meet their hopes with societal obligations.

### Women Struggles for Pursuit of Dreams

This theme deals with the struggles of film characters that they put to pursue their empowerment and combat for their freedom of choice. The film emphasized on the strive of women characters to forge their paths successfully in creative arts by managing the traditional constraints with family pressures. Maniza, Shahida and Sabina are depicted as strong characters in the film by facing challenges in their lives leading towards empowerment.

### Self-identity and Personal Development

Ho manna Jahan film was mainly focus on self-identity and personal growth. It is positively portrayed that how the quest of self-realization among women brings developments at every scale by challenging the societal norms particularly gender based and also exponent the personal freedom and individual growth. It stresses on the need of women progress in creative arts and overcoming traditional constraints for them.



Figure 1 Ho Mann Jahan Film Themes

### Verna

Verna is a film released in 2017 that is produced and directed by Shoaib Mansoor. This film focus on dilemmas of women lives like sexual assault, victimhood and social stigmatization. The story revolves around Sará s life who was sexually assaulted by the influential person and her struggles aftermath of this act. She faced issues of power, corruption and societal pressures but her continuous struggle for justice stressed on the need of women 's courage in their lives for empowered survivals.

### Themes of the film

The film delves in to multiple topics and address the issues of Pakistani societal reforms. The following are the themes of most significant issues that covered in the film.

#### Sexual Violence and Power abuse

The lead character Sara is a rape victim, and film explored the effects of sexual assault on women's lives. The central themes of the film are sexual violence and its impact on women 'lives and power abuse that how strong men in the society can exert control on victims by using their positions. Sultan is a son of Governor committed sexual violence and hinder justice with the support of corruption in Pakistani political system Sara is a strong lady who is a victim of rape represents the trauma of her life and psychological scars left behind after this act. The theme highlighted the need of reforms required in societal structures along with the protections of oppressed rights.

#### Victim Blaming as Societal Stigmatization

The film covered the most common issue existed in the society that they often blamed victims of sexual assault. Stigmatization is attached to the women instead of focusing on the crime and its perpetrator. Sara's struggles for justice put questions on her dignity and she faced judgements from family and society. This tendency actually move towards more women victimization. Verna stressed that societal attitude towards victims must be changed so system of justice will be established.

### Women's Rights

Verna film emphasized on the significance of women rights in the societies. Rights to respect, justice and dignity are the major concerns of women. Sara's efforts towards justice promoted the message of women empowerment and standup for their rights either they are marginalized in the society. The film focuses on women's courage to raise their voices for justice even in the obstacles.

### Patriarchy System

The film addresses the major concerns of women that they do not find support from the patriarchal culture of the society. When Sara asked for justice, she found obstacles from family and society in the name of respect and corrupt legal system. Sara's courage for her rights make remarkable change and found support from some male family members. Her efforts challenged the patriarchal system of society.

### Efforts for Justice and Gender Equality

This theme depicts the efforts of Sara to challenge the hindrances that women face in the legal process. Verna critiques the biased and corrupt legal system in which Sara's struggles are presented in pursuit of justice by facing pressures from influential perpetrator, political groups and society. The determination of lead character Sara for justice and rights is a call of the gender equality in society that reflects that women voices are respected and their rights are protected when they stand with courage for themselves.

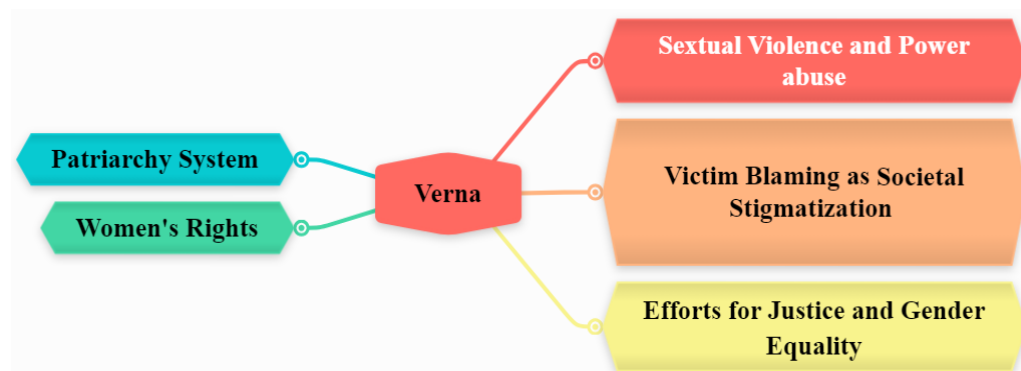


Figure 2 Verna Film Themes

### Parwaz Hai Junoon

This film was released on 2018, it was written by Farhat Ishtiaq and directed by Haseeb Hassan. The film is a tribute to Pakistan Air force and story covered the lives of young PAF cadets with their aspirations towards the nation they serve. It is a blend of action, patriotism and heartfelt moments. The film focused on the story of Sania , a young

flying officer who achieved success by overcoming the societal and professional challenges.

### Themes of the film

The film depicted strong narrative emphasized on the struggles of women in Pakistan Air Force. It covered several themes related to personal development and gender equality. The significant themes presented in the film are given below:

#### Women Empowerment and Equality

The film focuses on the women empowerment in the male dominated society and professions. Sania pursued her career in Air Force although she has faced many challenges and met with biases. But with these hindrances, she continued her journey and with her determination and passion achieved the desired target. This success stressed on the idea that women can achieve strong position in any profession.

#### Overcoming Gender Stereotypes

Parwaz Hai Junoon depicts women faced stereotypical behaviors and biases from males and society in their professional lives. The women pilots in male dominated professions faced discriminatory behaviors from them. The film highlighted the competence and resilience of women who are equally talented to excel in high pressure fields. The theme is central to the narrative by presenting women in strong roles instead of traditional boundaries.

#### Societal and Professional Challenges

The film focuses on Sania's journey in Pakistan Air Force and explored that how she deals with challenges gracefully. She continued her growth by overcoming societal and professional pressures. Her achievement as flying officer is based on her passion, strength and this theme build narrative that success can be attained by women through dedication.

#### Struggles of Female Soldiers

The film highlights the efforts of women and challenges they faced in the armed forces. They have been less recognized for their abilities and that's why have been underestimated for military jobs. Sania tolerated the biasness against women in these professions that reflects the societal views. Her experience of success with hard work and competency bring change in perceptions. The women in the Air Force break the stereotypical barriers and proved that they are capable to work in all fields.

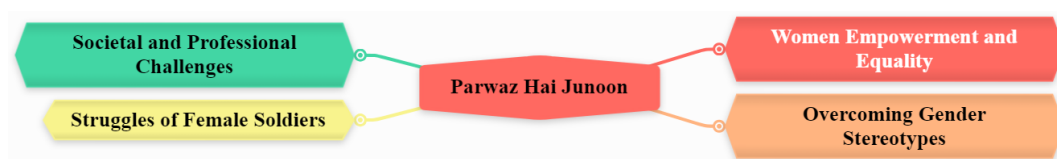


Figure 3 Parwaz Hai Junoon Film Themes

#### Load Wedding



The film is released in 2018, directed by Nabeel Qureshi. *Load Wedding* focuses on societal dynamics and pressures that came from traditional customs of marriage. It has given impactful message to generate thought provoking concerns in society. The issues of women are highlighted that are influenced from cultural norms regarding their widow and single status along with the dilemmas of dowry.

### Themes of film

The film explored many key themes regarding family dynamics and social pressures that address women concerns. The main themes of the film are given below.

### Struggles of Women in Marriage System

*Load Wedding* film emphasized on the efforts of women those they faced in traditional marriages where they are judged of being widow and often defined by dowry. Meerab and Baby Baji are dealing with the pressures to be perfect brides to meet the family and societal expectations. The film presented the emotional phase of women from which they suffered and stressed on the need of empowerment in the marriage system

### Women Traditional Roles and Societal Judgment

The film focuses on the challenges faced by women of being widow and unmarried. Meerab as widow viewed with pity and disdain. It depicts that how women on the base of their marital status are marginalized. On the other hand, Baby Baji is presented as unmarried because her family could not meet the heavy demands of dowry that make her desperate. The both women portrayals showed the societal judgment and stigma towards them as they do not conform to the traditional expectations. The film critique with the portrayal of women struggles to engage viewers to think about them that how they are treated in society.

### Irony Societal Traditions and Progressiveness

*Load Wedding* highlights the pressures of cultural practices like dowry, and widow status that make them unlucky on women. It reflects the traditional approach on life concerns but some characters are progressive in their opinion regarding marriage and family life. The tension between traditional thinking and modern values is portrayed. This film advocates for change in traditional practices without discarding cultural heritage and values should be equitable in marriage practices and gender roles.

### Emotional Support and Family Unity

The film focuses on cultural norms regarding family bonds and it also highlights the significance of emotional support. Raja, Meeru and their families faced hardships but their love for each other support them that ultimately helping them in passing the difficult situations. The film depicts the role of empathy and cooperation in the family system overcome the societal challenges.



#### Figure 4 Load Wedding Film Themes

### **Superstar**

This film was released in 2019, produced by Momina & Duraid Films and directed by Mohammed Ehteshamuddin. Superstar film focus on the values and complexities of film industry. It explores the struggles of women and challenges for them in pursuing their careers in male dominated entertainment industry. The story revolves around the experience of Noori's efforts of successful journey in the industry by presenting women issues.

### **Themes of film**

Superstar film explores the challenges of entertainment industry experienced by women particularly. It addresses multiple themes of gender dynamics that reflects the societal challenges and struggles. The key themes of the film are given below:

#### **Women 's Struggles in Film Industry**

This is the central theme in this film narrative. It depicted the challenges faced by women in male dominated film industry. Noor, a lead character embodies the hurdles in this competitive field and balance her successful career with personal life and societal expectations. She has faced discrimination in her career that is highlighted in the film as systematic barrier in the success of women.

#### **Women Judgment and Societal Expectation**

The film explores that women are affected by societal pressures and judgment but these are not issues for men. Noor's character in film shows that how she has been harshly judged by society for their behavior, relationships and career choices. The film raised the voice for women against double standards that they faced in their professional and personal lives for moral judgment and scrutiny.

#### **Gender Dynamic and Inequalities**

Superstar film focus on the gender inequalities that how women have to prove themselves more talented than men to get same level of recognition. Noor's experience in entertainment industry depicted her efforts to establish herself. She faced gender discrimination with limited opportunities, challenges such as being stereotyped and objectified. The film narrative showed Noor's strength and determination towards empowerment that challenged patriarchal norms and make her own space in film industry.

#### **Self-Development Journey**

The film highlights the struggles of women to maintain balance between personal and professional lives. The character of Noor is an inspiration that make her career successful by keeping her spirits high along with her personal griefs. The themes of personal growth are presented in Noor's character and reconciliation are also depicted in the final stages of Sameer and Noor's relationship. The film explores that professional and personal developments are continuing processes.





Figure 5 Superstar Film Themes

## Conclusion

This study examines how women are depicted in the contemporary Pakistani films by presenting their issues and talk about their rights. The female leads are portrayed strong to challenged the traditional boundaries of the society that hurdles their development. The women are depicted in unconventional roles to challenge the conventional approach of femineity towards them.

The study explores the shift of women portrayal from submissive and subdued characters to the empowered roles. This change proactive the viewers towards films as these are addressing important issues particularly relevant to the women. The existing discourse supported the vision of presenting them as an active member of the society and their contributions are highlighted. Yasir and Farooq (2022), stated that these films provided an indication to the traditional transformation because the women depicted connected with contemporary women deals. The counter narrative represented women as heroines with their portrayal a source of inspiration of being empowered and strong that provided films' perspective about their heard voices and emphasized on their actions for developmental changes.

The analysis of the contemporary Pakistani films showed that liberal feminist philosophy is observed in the scripts and films' discourse. The films focused on women rights, marital issues, sexual assault, corruption, societal problems and self- recognition. The dealings of women to meet the challenges of gender in equality and pressures were demonstrated. The liberal feminism is the center narrative in South Asian Films to address the gender inequality that provided structural imbalances in the society along with the women's struggles for their better survival ( Ali & Bhatti, 2019). The qualitative approach was used to find the in-depth analysis of contemporary films to uncover the actual themes depicted. The women characters presented are engaged in seeking autonomy, rights and equality but their portrayal are undermined with male dominated narratives. They have been portrayed as respectful and dignified with the societal acceptance of their roles those are linked to the mother, daughters and wives rather their independent personalities. The progressive approach about women rights are emerging in in Pakistani films but associated with traditional values in terms of dialogues, cinematic representations that deals with dual issues so changing realities of women in the society reflects the true feminist ideologies. (Mahmood & Shahid ,2021).

The research concluded that women portrayed in Pakistani contemporary films are in multidimensional characters that are dealing with different concerns but have the capacity to bring transformative actions. The movement towards positive and strong women portrayal are presented in the revived era of Pakistani cinema. The stereotypes, traditional approach and regressive tropes have been addressed. The voices of women rights dominate the narrative landscape in films. The women's positive portrayal is actually the development of societies that is focused in the cotemporary films.

### **Recommendations**

The research study “Women Portrayal in Pakistani Contemporary Films” focus on the latest trend of gender portrayal. It opens new horizons for Pakistani cinema research to highlight the women based themes that reflect the women contributions in society and their multifaceted identities. The film based on women matters are famous all over the world. Contemporary Pakistani films are trending worldwide as these are depicted feminist narrative in their storylines which grasp the audience’s attentions (Sarwar & Zeng, 2021). The research presented the analysis that after changing themes and storylines of films, this genre gained popularity in our country and people are more inclined towards cinema than previous years. So films should address the social issues that impact women and this content can bring positive change in society with awareness raise on certain problems. In this regard, the philosophies of liberal feminism should be incorporated in storylines. It will provide ideology to the film producers, directors that how they can produce films with strong narratives and also give view to the academicians to further study this domain regarding the impact, content and contributions of revived cinema particularly based on feminist discourse.

The study would sensitize the intersectionality topics that Pakistani films should deal them with the changing trends at global level. It will lead towards the inclusive and empowered representation of Pakistani women that will definitely bring positive change in the society.

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