

CURSE OF CHILD BRIDES IN PAKISTAN: A MEDIA DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PAKISTANI DRAMA "REEHAI"

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Abstract

This study explores the portrayal of child marriage in the Pakistani drama Reehai through the lens of Framing Theory. A quantitative research design was used and information gathered through a structured questionnaire that will be administered by the use of Likert scale among those viewers who have watched the drama. The findings reveal that Reehai effectively uses framing techniques to raise awareness, challenge societal norms, and inspire critical reflection on the issue of child marriage. Victimization, societal pressure, empowerment, and social change are some of the key frames identified which add a diversified view to the plights of child brides. The solution to the problem that is found in the drama and is centered on the importance of education, co-parenting, and respect, was said to be progressive and influential in its effects, making audiences rethink dangerous traditions. This study underscores the transformative potential of media in shaping public discourse and fostering social reform, illustrating how Reehai serves as a powerful tool for addressing sensitive societal issues in Pakistan.

Keywords: Child marriage, Pakistani drama, *Reehai*, Framing Theory, media discourse, social reform, victimization, empowerment, societal norms

1. Introduction

Dramas play a significant role in reflecting the culture and social trends of any society (Happer & Philo, 2013; Imada, 2012). These dramas serve as a window into the values, beliefs, ideas, norms, and traditions that people follow (Fejes, 1981; Malik, 2013). Viewers can derive much of this information about how people live, behave, and think by simply watching these dramas (Gerbner et al., 1994; Ali, 2016). The entertainment industry, especially through dramas, functions as a mirror that unveils the essence of society (Jamil, 2017; Zia, 2017). Specifically, the impact of Pakistani dramas is rather insidious and strong, as it influences the perception of society in the way that might not have been accessible otherwise (Happer & Philo, 2013; Gerbner et al., 1994). The narratives described in such dramas do not only represent a certain entertainment; rather, they give an insight into the life of tens of millions of people and their problems (Ahmad & Saleem, 2019; Jensen & Rosengren, 1990).

The inquiry into cultural values deeper than the ones rooted in familial duty and honor, especially the prevalence of this theme in Pakistani dramas, transcends the work of fictional writing and is an element beyond the script (Hussain, 2020; Fejes, 1981). In such a way Pakistani television drama is more than the form of entertainment as Hussain and Niaz (2020) argue as a strong means to influence the debate about the problem requiring specific adjustments in public in terms of the gender role, the relations in the family, the expectations of society, etc. They precondition a discussion of these crucial issues with the faces of gender roles, family relationships, and social expectations in the community (Baig & Khan, 2018; Happer & Philo, 2013). Framing such cultural and social issues, dramas are not merely entertaining—they initiate the debates and put a new perspective before the audience (Akhtar,

2015; Gerbner et al., 1994). The importance of dramas in influencing social attitude in the society is an undisputed fact, thus it is a key instrument in creating a positive move and change in the society (Rehman, 2021; Gerbner et al., 1994).

Media roles in framing social issues are clearly distinguished in the fields of media studies. The framing theory, introduced by Erving Goffman (1974), is based on the assumption that presentation of a media story with a particular frame can shape how the audiences perceive and interpret the story. The media picks specific realities, emphasizes them and frames them in a manner that dictates how the society will interpret it (Goffman, 1974). Of the Pakistani dramas, in this case, the framing usually takes the form of depictions of traditional cultural values and social standards. According to Raza et al. (2023), such images are very influential in the formation of public opinion because it helps to put into the true light subjects that would be marginalized or considered taboo.

The Pakistani drama *Reehai* is one of the cases when such framing is used, especially in the aspect of child marriage, a widespread problem in Pakistan, as it is promoted by cultural traditions, which tend to choose familial pride instead of personal happiness (Ijaz et al., 2022). Such marriages are usually non-consensual and they severely impede the health mental and emotional health of the girls, restricting their accessibility to education and personal growth (Raza et al., 2023). Using the framing theory, not only does the movie, *Reehai*, present a story, but it also presents a commentary on how societal expectations and traditions cause such negative practices as child marriage. Due to the revision of the issue as a macro-societal one, the viewers are encouraged to consider their values and the sets of values which direct family lives and are treated as cultural norms. More so, the plays such as *Reehai* indicate, media coverage of such a problem can contribute to the social change through encouraging people to discuss the issues and increase their awareness of those problems.

Framing is so powerful because it allows the presentation of the issues in such a manner that it will lead to critical thinking and encouragement of empathy by the viewers (Hussain & Niaz, 2020).

Although there is a recently increased body of research on the Pakistani television drama and social impact associated with it, inadequate focus has been given to the framing practices associated with such sensitive topics by the audience. This article seeks to address this gap by applying framing theory to *Reehai*'s media discourse analysis to examine how the drama's narrative structure shapes audience perceptions of child marriage, gender roles, and social norms. By analyzing the characters' experiences and the social pressures they face, this study aims to uncover how "*Reehai*" frames the issue of child marriage and its wider implications for Pakistani society. In addition, through the medium of 'Framing Theory,' the study will aim to highlight some of the implicit/explicit messages about patriarchal norms, gender roles and its influences on the people around them.

1.1 Significance of the Study

To bring awareness in Pakistani society regarding child marriage and its resulting impacts and to analyze the media's role in shaping public discourse to drive social change

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To analyze the framing techniques used in the drama "*Reehai*" to depict sensitive societal issues.
2. To examine the impact of media framing on public discourse around child marriage in the context of the drama "*Reehai*".
3. To investigate how the narrative of "*Reehai*" portrays character struggle which reflects broader societal issues.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the framing techniques used in the drama “*Reehai*” to reflect sensitive societal issues?
2. Why does media framing in “*Reehai*” influence public discourse around child marriage?
3. How does the narrative of “*Reehai*” reflect broader societal struggles?

2. Literature Review

Media discourse studies, particularly through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), focus on how power dynamics and ideologies are embedded in media texts. CDA is especially prominent in exposing such secret prejudices and ideologies in media through its analysis of how certain social groups are represented at both verbal and discursive levels. The latter approach is vital to explaining social and political impact that media has on society by means of discourse (Ramanathan & Hoon, 2015). The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) or Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) focuses on the reproduction of power imbalances like sexism, racism and social inequality through discourse and is an interdisciplinary research method. Uniqueness of the approach is that it puts attention on the relationship between discourse and social structures within the context of sociocognitive frame, which establishes linking of mental representations with the cognitive basis of discourse. Power, in this context, is understood as control over discourse and, by extension, over people's thoughts (Van Dijk, 2015). Since the late 1990s, the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has come into the limelight in the studies on media discourse. CDA has been extensively used in the presentation of hidden ideologies in media especially on the aspects of power relations expressed through debate. Through media discourse analysis, CDA reveals the social disparities that are created through communication and looks into power instruments that influence popular opinion (Sari et al., 2018).

Framing theory is the school of thought that entails individuals projects and idea formations of issues according to their presentations. It highlights how specific aspects of an issue are emphasized which can alter people's perceptions and attitudes. More widely speaking, framing influences the opinion of the masses, it is said that a frame is able to lead to changes in the priority of particular values or considerations among individuals. This is about how the drop-out rate decreased by almost 48 points to 24.8 points, over a year (Chong & Druckman, 2007). A framing effect is an aspect whereby a communicator highlights some details of an issue and this leads to the way people perceive and rank the considerations in their perceptions when coming up with opinions. (Druckman, 2001). Framing theory is an efficient framework to study visual information stressing that the effects of visual perception are important in enhancing the knowledge of the audience (Coleman, 2009). Framing has, therefore, been crucial in predetermining how cultural values, both contemporary and traditional, can be packaged (in Pakistani television dramas era). The narratives presented frequently highlight modern values over traditional ones which influences viewers' perceptions and social norms. Television is an important tool of introducing and negotiating cultural changes, which is the crucial tool of social influence and teaching (Ashfaq, 2023).

Pakistani television dramas are a medium for influencing social and cultural norms, often embedding ideological messages within the content. These dramas shape viewers' perceptions of values and behavior by presenting specific worldviews and promoting particular ideologies. Media producers use a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic elements, such as color schemes, language patterns and sound, to subtly convey these ideologies. This form of media discourse significantly impacts how viewers understand and adopt these ideologies (Ijaz et al., 2022). Social issues like inequality regarding gender, violence at home, mental health and much more influence the thoughts of the viewer through dramas. Mahmood (2023) asserts that these stories have entertainment values but can even trigger discussions that can bring a change. Naz and

Mahmood (2015) pointed out that even though the Pakistani drama engages sensitive topics, it still permits many stereotypes, mainly the terms related to relationships with women. The attitude formed in society is closely connected with the media representation of sensitive themes. Television often provides a sense of companionship for individuals facing isolation by creating a sense of resonance with on-screen characters. Over time, drama content has evolved from family-centered narratives to more complex themes that mirror societal challenges, shaping how young viewers perceive family dynamics and broader social issues (Sherazi et al., 2022).

Child marriage is an unfavorable societal issue affecting multitudes of girls with having adverse effects on their health, well-being and education as well as economic dependency which results in poverty and inequality (Fan & Koski, 2021; Psaki, Melnikas, & Haque, 2019; Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021; Hossain, Abdulla, & Banik, 2021). Child marriage remains an adverse problem in Pakistan affecting 19 million girls with 1 in 6 young women married before the legal age of 18 which results in a severe impact on their health, education and socioeconomic status (UNICEF, 2019). Media represents these issues, particularly through dramas and the repercussions experienced by a child bride thereby drawing attention to the matter (Buchmann, Field, & Glennerster, 2020). These representations in media highlight the mental and emotional damage to young brides by framing them as victims of social and familial expectations (Rahiem, 2021) which not only addresses the unfavorable consequences but also emphasizes the importance of legal actions, women's empowerment and gender roles (McGavock, 2020). In Pakistan, the issue of forced marriages is prevalent. According to the study, gender inequalities, poverty, traditional and religious practices, and weak legislation cause forced marriages. (Myers & Harvey, 2011).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design:

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine audience perceptions of the framing of child marriage in the Pakistani drama “*Reehai*”. The data was collected through a structured Likert scale questionnaire.

3.2 Data Collection:

A questionnaire was designed with 15 close-ended Likert scale questions, focusing on various aspects of the drama's framing techniques, societal norms, and the impact on viewers' opinions. The questions were based on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The participants were asked to assess the effectiveness of the drama in portraying child marriage and its resolution.

3.3 Sampling:

The study used convenience sampling, targeting 20-25 university students who had watched the drama “*Reehai*”. This ensured the participants were sufficiently familiar with the show to provide meaningful responses.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework informs the direction of this research, which is grounded on the Framing Theory which was done by Erving Goffman (1974). According to the framing concept, the media's treatment of information widely influences how audiences perceive and handle issues. Through the processes of narrowing, intensifying, and abandoning certain elements of reality, the media creates meaning that consequently leads to distorted perception of the discussed problems by the population (Entman, 1993).

Goffman (1974) had a fresh perspective of frames as interpretative tools used by people to frame and group social events. Framing is the communication process that makes the consumers concentrate on the selected features of an issue and overlook the other aspects

(Chong & Druckman, 2007). It is this phenomenon that defines the order of value introduced by the individuals on specific social issues such as the issue of child marriage.

The utilization of the framing theory in the discussion of the *Reehai* enables one to study deeper how the narrative triplets, such as characterization and portrayal are used, as well as visual and sonic elements play an important role in putting the problem of child marriage to the fore. A good example is the way the show has been construed to portray the social conditions that encourage the practice of child marriage. By reflecting the conflicts that the characters have to confront and the susceptibility of parents to mass pressure in the society, the show offers a sort of glass through which the viewers observe the social problems with greater impact, as well as the gender problem, the family stereotypes, and the convention practices.

This practice is also aligned with concepts of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which is an approach that analyzes the relationship between use of language and power relations in society. The influence of cultural ideas through the media has been referred to in CDA. Therefore, there may be some measures that need to be made to reinforce a particular concept or even shift it (Van Dijk, 2015). The narration on child marriage of *Reehai* is the chosen opportunity to transform the country into a better one. By doing so, the viewers will be able to recognize and comment to the filmmakers about the prevailing socio-economic problems and patriarchal values. Another literary device used in the narrative is the framing device that brings a critical question regarding the cultural practices that were being debated.

The story of *Reehai* is constructed on repetition of a reality, which can be the theme of the study that is conducted once the CDA is appended to an idea of framing. In this way, the reader gets a more perfect image of how media language may affect the population and generate the atmosphere of dialogue in the context of uncomfortable issues.

4. Analysis

The report contains the research of survey carried out in order to evaluate the perception of audience towards the drama *Reehai* and the representation of topic of child marriage in it. The Likert scale of five-points (strongly disagree to strongly agree) was applied in assessing the review of the survey responses. Its analysis is on the fact that the play heightens awareness, perceptions as well as undermines conventional societal norms. In order to illustrate the data, pie charts have been incorporated regarding each of the questions, which present a transparent image of how the questions were answered. This detailed discussion is an attempt to show the influence of the drama on the readers and how it helps bring social awareness and reforms.

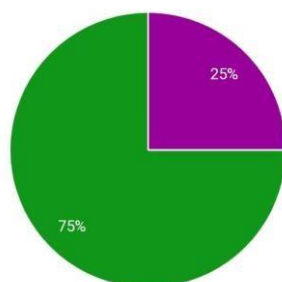
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Five-point Likert Scale:

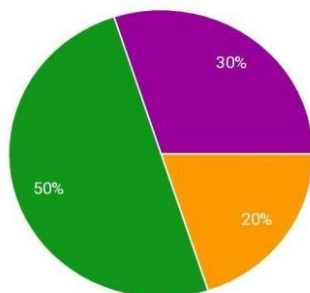
Question 1: The drama “*Reehai*” effectively portrays the issue of child marriage.

Analysis:

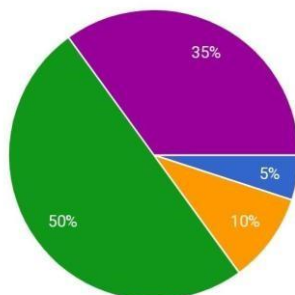
75% of respondents agreed with this statement, and 25% strongly agreed, making a total of 100% in favor. This highlights a unanimous acknowledgment of the drama’s portrayal of child marriage. There were no neutral or disagreeing responses.



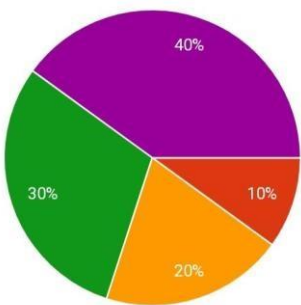
Question 2: Watching “*Reehai*” has increased my awareness of the consequences of child marriage. **Analysis:** 50% agreed, and 30% strongly agreed, while 20% remained neutral. This shows that 80% of viewers felt the drama increased their awareness, with a small portion (20%) taking no definitive stance. No disagreement was recorded.



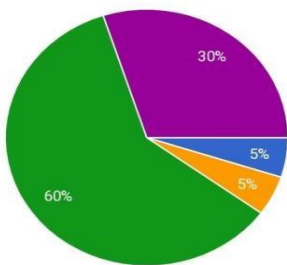
Question 3: The drama accurately depicts the emotional and mental struggles faced by child brides. **Analysis:** 50% agreed, and 35% strongly agreed, meaning 85% found the depiction accurate. Only 10% were neutral, and 5% strongly disagreed. This indicates that while the majority appreciated the portrayal, a small percentage questioned its accuracy.



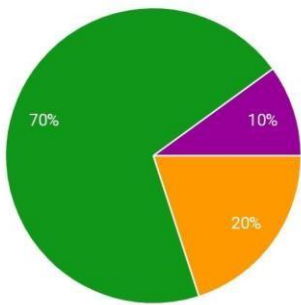
Question 4: The portrayal of family dynamics in the drama reflects real-life cultural expectations. **Analysis:** 30% agreed, and 40% strongly agreed, indicating that 70% saw the family dynamics as culturally realistic. Meanwhile, 20% were neutral, and 10% disagreed, suggesting that some viewers may have found the depiction less relatable.



Question 5: The drama challenges traditional societal norms that perpetuate child marriage.
Analysis:60% agreed, and 30% strongly agreed, making a total of 90% who felt the drama challenges harmful traditions. A small minority (5%) remained neutral or disagreed.



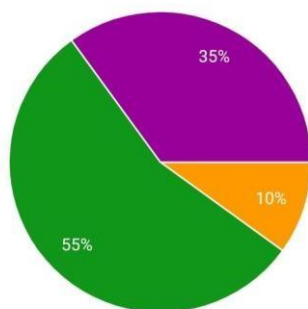
Question 6: Watching “Reehai” has changed my perspective on child marriage.
Analysis:
 70% agreed, and 10% strongly agreed, totaling 80% who experienced a perspective shift. However, 20% remained neutral, possibly indicating they were already aware of the issue or felt unaffected by the drama.



Question 7: The drama encourages viewers to critically reflect on harmful traditions and practices.
Analysis:

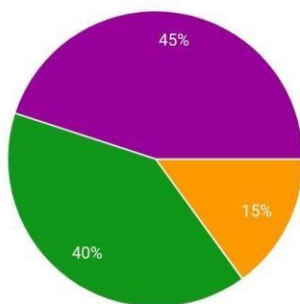
55% agreed, and 35% strongly agreed, meaning 90% felt the drama inspired critical reflection. Only 10% were neutral, with no disagreement noted.

Question 8: “Reehai” inspires discussions about the need for social change in Pakistan.



Analysis:

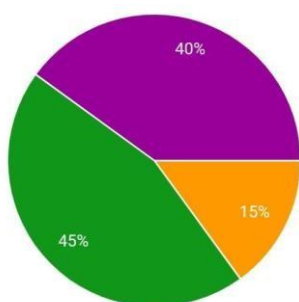
40% agreed, and 45% strongly agreed, making 85% of viewers see the drama as a catalyst for discussions on societal change. Neutral responses accounted for 15%, while no disagreement was recorded.



Question 9: Pakistani dramas like “*Reehai*” are an effective medium for addressing sensitive social issues.

Analysis:

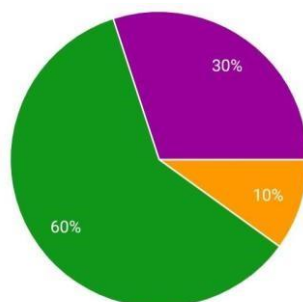
45% agreed, and 40% strongly agreed, showing that 85% supported the idea of dramas as effective tools for social awareness. Around 15% remained neutral, with no dissenting responses.



Question 10: The framing of child marriage in “*Reehai*” influences viewers’ opinions on this practice.

Analysis:

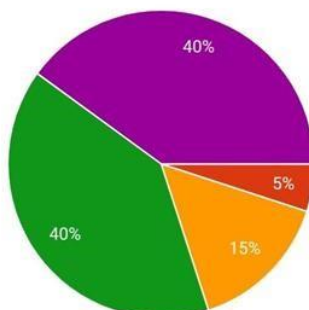
60% agreed, and 30% strongly agreed, making a total of 90% who felt their opinions were influenced by the drama. The remaining 10% were neutral, with no disagreement noted.



Question 11: The drama “*Reehai*” portrays a realistic and positive resolution to the issue of child marriage.

Analysis:

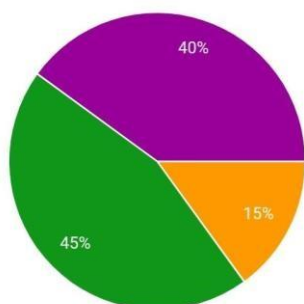
40% agreed, and 40% strongly agreed, indicating that 80% felt the resolution was realistic and positive. Around 15% were neutral, and a small 5% disagreed.



Question 12: The characters’ pursuit of education after their divorce inspires viewers to prioritize personal growth over societal pressures.

Analysis:

45% agreed, and 40% strongly agreed, meaning 85% found the characters’ choices inspiring. The remaining 15% were neutral, with no disagreement.

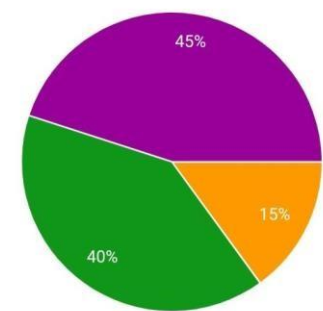


Question 13: In *Reehai*, the division and respect that the two partners of the couple maintain questions the societal norms regarding the compulsory marriage.

Analysis:

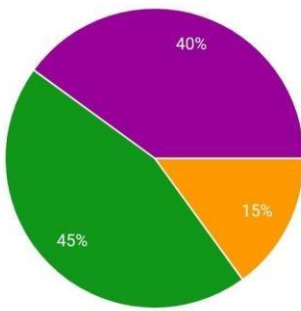
40 percent of the respondents agreed and 45 percent strongly agreed which adds up to 85 percent who perceived the resolution as progressive. Approximately, 15 percent of the respondents

reported being neutral, and no dispute was indicated.



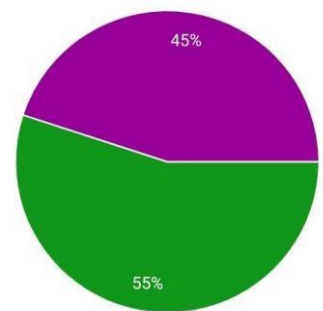
Question 14: It is with regards to progressive family interactions in traditional families that co-parenting in the form that it is done in the *Reehai* is viewed.

Analysis:
 Fourty five percent agreed and forty percent strongly agreed that co-parenting is a progressive theme as eighty five percent of the respondents deemed co-parenting as a progressive theme. Only a small percentage 15 percent of the population were neutral having no disagreements.



Question 15: The conclusion of *Reehai* motivates the audience to question the life-long impact of child marriage.

Analysis:
 An agreement was 55 percent and strongly agreed 45 percent that is 100 percent of the respondents considered the ending to be effective and thought-provoking.



Findings

a) Raising Awareness

The short film, *Reehai*, was successful in exposing the deeper social vice of child marriage which is very engraved in the societies. The drama raised awareness and made the respondents critically think about this delicate issue as many of them admitted. The show managed to capture the attention of the viewers and encourage them to get involved in the important conversation, creating empathy and insight, due to the nature of the depictions of the reality and the impacts of early marriages.

b) Cultural Relevance

The family interaction affiliated with family design and the pressure of society by the drama has touched an important part of the audience. Lots of audience members were able to connect with the plight of the characters and identify with their culture and families. But a few percentages reported not to find the situations relatable; perhaps due to different individual or regional backgrounds. Nevertheless, the story managed to strike down the core of social issues affecting the lives of many people.

c) Challenging Norms

The successful climax in *Reehai* was highly acclaimed on progressive values, which include the essence of education, co-parenting, and respectfulness in relationships. Not only did these elements provide a refreshing insight but it also put into question long held societal norms. The play motivated the audience to doubt conventional customs and imagine more wholesome, fairer lifestyles, which was a great step of social transformation.

d) Media's Role

The findings stress the emancipatory power of Pakistani plays such as the play, *Reehai*. These plays stimulate debates and raise awareness by airing out delicate social matters. The success of the show is a clear indication that media is one of the great tools of transformation as it influences communities to explore major issues undermining the community and employ rights on the way to scope change.

Conclusion

This paper explains how Pakistani dramas and especially the drama *Reehai*, have proved to be very influential in shaping sensitive aspects of society like child marriage. By using Framing Theory, it becomes clear that the movie, "*Reehai*" does not only display the bitter truths of the child marriage but also generates serious intellectual engagement in the minds of the audience of how culture and society are contributing to the practice through societal demands and stress. The drama's depiction of the emotional and mental struggles of child brides, along with its portrayal of family dynamics and the resolution of these issues, resonates deeply with audiences, encouraging them to challenge traditional norms and consider more progressive alternatives.

The monograph results indicate that the distorted impact of child marriage is rather addressed in the program called the *Reehai*, and a notable segment of the audience admits to the change in their perceptions after having viewed the drama. As it addresses such themes as education, mutual respect, and co-parenting, the drama suggests a progressive way of looking at family and social norms and how society may expect people to behave, letting the viewers doubt detrimental traditions and reflect critically on the potential outcomes of forced marriages.

In addition, the research highlights the influence of media in shaping of discourse and propagation of social change. The universality of the belief that *Reehai* has played a role in the debates regarding child marriage and the necessity of society revolution lends a supporting voice to the possible usefulness of television dramas in initiating social change. Thereby

offering a platform to discuss such problems as gender inequality and forced marriage, “*Reehai*” shows how media can literally question the established cultural pattern and help to build a fairer society.

To sum up, in the research, consideration was given to the role of framing in media discourse and the power that it had to manipulate the opinions of the population. The powerful story in “*Reehai*” has successfully become a medium of awareness-creation and stirring up critical discourse regarding the burning social issues in Pakistan especially the evils of child marriage. The article is an indication that media with the right discourse has the ability to be an influential change agent, stimulating more knowledge of the societal ills and provoking watchers to participate in discussion groups involving reforming vices.

Implications for Future Researchers

The data analysis and findings in the research suggest several implications for the future, particularly regarding media's role in influencing social change and shaping public discourse. Child marriage and the consequences of it are vividly presented through the drama —“*Reehai*”, which demonstrates how the media can be utilized in raising awareness about a problem that person of the modern world is afraid to talk about. The way the narrative is framed makes it so that the viewers think critically about unhealthy aspects of culture and established norms. Media can also be used in the future by researchers to confront old traditions and create progressive mindsets. The character conflict and family dynamics are depicted, similar to the experiences of the audience, affecting the idea of child marriage and the society it lives in. Dramas can still define the mass discourse, engage dialogue striving to change the social injustices by contextualizing such matters in relatable cultural contexts. The presentation of such positive results as an education and co-parenting in the difficult situations may empower the persons to be capable of making decision in favors of the personal growth instead of social duties.

In addition, other existing social concerns, namely gender inequality, mental issues, and domestic violence await investigation by future researchers whose purpose will be to make use of media as an educational factor based on the scholarly frameworks where the current research is based. The next drama can include a wider range of views so that it will be more relatable and representing a larger variety of regional and cultural experiences. Future studies can be conducted to learn about the long-term effects of these media on transforming the attitudes and behavior within the society. Finally, the implication on the findings indicates the empowering prospects of such dramas as —“*Reehai*” to be used as an awareness means, empathic journey, and changes in the society establishing a scale for future action both in media, policy, and research areas.

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