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# Evolving Feminism: The Portrayal of Women in "Zindagi Gulzar Hai" and Its Impact on Television Culture

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**ABSTRACT:** Feminism, the belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes, has been an ongoing movement for decades. Over time, it has evolved, and while there are still many barriers to overcome, the representation of women in the media has been changing. Television has been an important medium for the depiction of feminism, both positively and negatively. In this article, we will explore the portrayal of women in television and how it has evolved over time. We will examine popular TV show- "Zindagi Gulzar Hai" that has contributed to the representation of feminism and discuss how these representations have influenced the public's perception of the movement. Furthermore, we will analyse the impact of these portrayals on society's understanding of gender roles, and how TV has become a battleground for feminist representation in mainstream media. Finally, we will discuss the future of feminism in television and how it can continue to progress and inspire audiences around the world.

**KEYWORDS:** feminism, patriarchy, gender studies, media, TV culture,

## I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism, the belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes, has been an ongoing movement for decades that evolved throughout the time. Emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century throughout the Western world, the First-wave feminism has its major roots in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft- the British philosopher and women's rights advocate who authored *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)- a classic of rationalist feminism. While the first wave focussed on the legal issues, primarily on securing women's right to vote, the Second wave feminism (1960s- 1970s) broadened the debate and comprised a wide range of issues i.e., sexuality, reproductive rights, sexual freedom and women's claim to that sexual freedom, and other legal inequalities. The Second wave feminism was highly influenced by the French feminist writer, Simon de Beauvoir who in her 2 volume work *The Second Sex* (1949) talks about how woman's reality has been constituted and its subsequent consequences since woman has been considered as an Other, also making it obvious that gender is not a biological concept but a cultural construct that is gradually acquired. Whereas, the third wave feminism that began in the early 1990's was a diverse movement and sees women's life as intersectional, demonstrating the factors such as race, class, gender, nationality and ethnicity in discussing feminism.

Over time, feminism has evolved, and while there are still many barriers to overcome, the representation of women in the media has been changing. Television has been an important medium for the depiction of feminism, both positively and negatively. The pattern of the representation of women in contemporary times has been studied through analysis of the Drama Serial "Zindagi Gulzar Hai".

"Zindagi Gulzar Hai" (ZGH) is a popular Pakistani television drama that aired in 2012. The show follows the journey of a young woman, Kashaf Murtaza, who dreams of a better life despite facing numerous obstacles in her path. The drama is often praised for its feminist themes and portrayal of strong, independent female characters. Thereby, encompassing the subjective lived experiences of women who don't live in the western societies which is where most current feminist discourse comes from. These women are often overlooked in the theoretical framework of feminism, which does not take into account cultural differences. So, in a sense, feminism isn't just theoretical or a singular discourse, rather it's plural in the sense how people negotiate with the patriarchy; thereby resisting, subverting and also using it for survival.

It is not surprising that women are frequently at the centre of narratives in Pakistani dramas since many of them revolve around heterosexual romantic tales and family issues. In these stories, women are depicted as living not only in



the feminist bubble but also in multiple realities, each of which is very different and carries with it its own unique struggles, as is the case in ZGH.

## II. MULTIFACETED WOMEN OF “ZINDAGI GULZAR HAI”

Written, produced and directed by a woman, the series “Zindagi Gulzar Hai” is women centric with its major cast being women. It showcases feminism in a different light where at one level there are women like Rafia, in a role as the mother of Kashaf Murtaza who epitomizes maternal love, selflessness, and empowerment, making a lasting impression on her family as well as the audience of the show. On the other hand, there are women like Ghazala (Zaroon’s mother) and Sara (Zaroon’s sister) who are financially independent, well-educated and live a decent life, thereby subverting gender roles and thus are portrayed in a negative light.

Rafia (Kashaf’s mother) is seen as a strong woman who struggles with being a single mother in a patriarchal society right away. Despite being deceived by her selfish husband for the sake of a son, lives alone with her three daughters- Kashaf, Sidra and Shehnala and single handedly raises them and makes sure they are well behaved and educated. At the same time, she is seen handling financial difficulties and social shame with dignity and elegance. She says, “*Kismat hamesha insaan ki karamo ki nazar mein hoti hai*”.

Rafia perseveres in her will to support her family in the face of hardship, putting in endless hours as a teacher to make ends meet. Her steadfast commitment to her girls' education and welfare is among her most admirable qualities. She instils in them the value of knowledge and freedom since she understands how important education is as a weapon for empowerment and self-reliance. Rafia's concentration on education acts as a compass for Kashaf, motivating her to push through challenges and tenaciously pursue her academic goals.

Being simple, wise and traditional, Rafia is ‘brave and stalwart’ who easily forgives and empathises with people without even losing her self-respect. At the same time, she is full of gratitude for all the good things in her life. By being grounded and down to earth she plays a very strong and an important role in Kashaf’s life.

Kashaf, the central character of the series, comes from a humble background, with very little support from her family except for her mother who was a motivating force through her life. She comes across as downright rude and arrogant since for her, her khuddari (self-respect) matters the most, for she is the one to attempt to overcome her obstacles by seeking self-empowerment and independence amidst the hardship. She is really a down to earth and a person pure at heart. This is evident in her dialogue when she says, “*Jis insaan ka dil saaf ho, uski soch bhi saaf hoti hai.*”

Kashaf’s ability to persevere in the face of hardship, prejudice, and conflict in her family is evident of her inner fortitude and resolve. Throughout the series, Kashaf’s connections with her family, particularly her father, highlight the complex facets of gender in Pakistani society. Despite being a highly educated person, Kashaf’s father perpetuates patriarchal customs by maintaining traditional gender roles and favouring her siblings over her. In contrast, Kashaf questions these presumptions and fights for her respect and equality in the family. Her quest of knowledge and her reluctance to renounce her morals in the name of love upend gender norms and expectations, making her a figure of agency and disobedience as is evident in her rejection of Zaroon’s proposal several times. As a symbol of rebellion and agency, she challenges established gender norms and expectations through her pursuit of knowledge and her reluctance to compromise her values for the sake of love. She too worries and questions her circumstances and life in general. This is evident when she mentions in her diary,

*“Mai sochti hun, Allah tala ne hamari zindagi itni mushkil kyu bna di hai... Mai baar baar yhi sochti hu.... Yhi poochti rhti hu... lekin jawab! Jawab kahin senhi milta...”*

In contrast to Kashaf’s struggles, “Zindagi Gulzar Hai” also features Sara Junaid, portrayed by Ayesha Omar, a young woman from a privileged background who grapples with issues of identity, self-worth, and societal expectations. Sara’s journey highlights the complexities of class, privilege, and familial pressure, offering a contrasting perspective to Kashaf’s narrative.

Women like Ghazala and Sara are independent women, living outside of home, who have a decent job and are financially independent, well-educated and have an easy access to all those resources. Despite of being supported by their better halves, women from the so called rich background too, live in the largely patriarchal society wherein they are supposed to negotiate with the social reality- both at the level of family and at the level of larger society.

In a sense, both these women do not fit into the concept of a Victorian feminine ideal i.e., “angel in the house” wherein a woman is supposed to be modest, pure and angelic, selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband at the same time. In addition, the show presents viewers to a host of different female characters, each of whom



has distinct goals and challenges of her own. Kashaf's family members, including her sisters Sidra and Shehnila, shed light on the varied experiences that women have in Pakistani society. Characters like Sara and Asmara also provide insights into the difficulties women encounter in juggling relationships, professional goals, and social expectations. This is evident from Sara's failed marriage which led Zaroon to develop some notions about his ideal wife. Meanwhile, Asmara suffered when she and Zaroon call off their engagement due to the incompatible lifestyle choices.

### III. PATRIARCHY AND GENDERED PERCEPTIONS

Screenwriter and playwright Umera Ahmed, from Pakistan, acknowledges that her well-known drama *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* didn't fully challenge gender roles, but it was a deliberate choice to represent societal realities alongside the society's understanding of gender roles. Since it was penned down in 1998, when patriarchy was way more rooted than it is today, Ahmed found it difficult to question the ingrained patriarchy and this is evident in stereotypical depictions of the male characters throughout the drama. Kashaf's father, Murtaza exhibits a patriarchal attitude. He prioritizes his sons' schooling and prospects for the future over those of his diligent daughters. Both Kashaf's father and brother are depicted as arrogant, patriarchal individuals who believe that women shouldn't pursue higher education. They even make an attempt to persuade Kashaf's mother to oppose Kashaf's pursuit of higher education. But when Murtaza tries to have her married in order to prevent her from obtaining a graduate degree, she defends her daughter Kashaf.

Simultaneously, when Kashaf eventually marries Zaroon, Rafia instructs her daughter that she has to make regular calls to her husband's parents to inquire about their well-being and perform all household chores, including cooking meals for him, among many other things, by hand. This type of compassion, when you do something for your spouse out of concern, is not reciprocated by Zaroon in any way, and it inevitably places Kashaf in a subordinate position. At the same time, Rafia, despite having resentment towards her husband, Murtaza, redeems herself for her daughters' sake, as they have never been taught to despise their father and are instead constantly encouraged to treat him with civility and respect. This entire storyline is patriarchal in that it conveys the idea that a man should be respected regardless of whether he deserts his daughter; after all, he is her father.

The patriarchal ideals upheld in *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* grant a man the authority to control the behavior, appearance, and preferences of women who are connected to him. One can observe the privileges that the male characters frequently enjoy and suffer less repercussions for their deeds. This is made clear by the fact that Kashaf is scrutinized and judged for voicing her ideas and standing up for herself, whereas Zaroon acts flirtatiously and receives little backlash. Zaroon, despite being well educated rich brat and belonging to a modern society that also comprises "modern women", despises them for being opinionated, ambitious and passionate. On one occasion he says, "*Headstrong aur liberal, mujhe yeh dono baatein kisi bhi aurat mein pasand nahi hai.*"

He sees women's emancipation as an ego battle between the two genders and sees feminism as a tool employed by women to denigrate males. As a man, it's normal for him to return home late and drop off a girl at night, but it would be disrespectful to his family if his sister did the same. Zaroon believes that his mother and his sister have "too much freedom and independence," and that his mother has not been very involved in his and Sara's upbringing and has missed out on family time due to her professional employment. Zaroon is shown criticizing Asmara, his fiancée, for her choices in clothing, sexuality, and time spent outside the home, all because she chose to wear what she wanted to and shares her pictures on Facebook. He even accuses his sister's coming home late at night as the reason for her failed marriage and an inability to be a good wife. One can feel the toxicity and the double standards of Zaroon in particular and men in general.

Even, Zaroon's father, Junaid, shares these sentiments, and when Sara's own marriage ends, she eventually begins to hold her mother Ghazala responsible. But if a man can't find time for his family due to work, that's okay because he's supporting his family; on the other hand, if a woman puts her profession above "making memories," even for a little moment, she is suddenly labeled as "unwise." Zaroon, for his part, acknowledges that he would not have been as understanding or flexible and that it would have caused a lot of problems for his wife, but he does respect his father's "patience" in being so understanding. In a way, he is sympathising with his father for tolerating a wife like her mother. She is not even spared by her daughter, as gets a reprimand from Sara, saying that it was her responsibility as a mother to prevent Sara from quickly divorcing her husband and that it was Ghazala's fault that Sara had never learned to compromise. It's crucial to remember that Ghazala is portrayed negatively in this scene, which is further reinforced by the ominous background music. One can see the how patriarchal mindset has been imbibed and strongly internalised by the characters like Rafia, Sara and the male characters who leave no stone unturned in dominating women and considering them as their subservient.



Kashaf encounters the discriminatory practices that the society imposes on women. She observes how women are required to conform to rigid cultural and societal norms, while their male counterparts are afforded greater freedom and possibilities. She witnesses this during her college life where she meets Zaroon Junaid, who leads a life completely different from hers. Kashaf finds Zaroon's haughty conceit extremely annoying. She doesn't socialize with other students because of her mistrust of males and her beliefs about social classes. She doesn't even get along with Zaroon, mostly because of his flirting behavior and his jealousy of her superior scholastic standing.

Yet despite all this and the major class difference what allows her to submit to Zaroon and accept his marriage proposal is the fact that Zaroon prevents Kashaf from getting burned by hot tea and rather burns himself. For Kashaf, it was the greatest gesture of her life because she had never felt so guarded and safe. One can observe the significance attributed to stability and family acceptance in conventional gender roles. Yet, she is shown to have made her decision to marry Zaroon on the basis of her own emotions and experiences rather than as someone who was passively accepted. This calls into question the conventional wisdom that views women as passive beneficiaries of decisions. In a sense "Zindagi Gulzar Hai" depicts Kashaf's choice to marry Zaroon as both conforming to and defying conventional gender norms in South-Asian society.

Although the play discusses the difficulties faced by women in a patriarchal society, it avoids specifically delving into feminist theory or designating any of its characters as feminists. ZGH upholds South Asian conservative norms, which grant men the authority to make decisions regarding and on behalf of "their" women.

#### IV. BREAKING STEREOTYPES

The way women are portrayed in the Pakistani television series "Zindagi Gulzar Hai" has played a significant role in dispelling myths and questioning conventional gender roles. With its complex characters and engaging narrative, the show presents a novel and forward-thinking viewpoint on women's position in society.

Pursuing education is a primary means by which the female characters in the series defy stereotypes. By putting her studies and career goals ahead of marriage, the main character Kashaf Murtaza challenges social norms. Kashaf, who comes from a lower middle class family, is adamant about doing well in school despite many obstacles. Her commitment exposes the myth that women should just take care of their homes and emphasizes the value of education as a tool for female emancipation.

"Zindagi Gulzar Hai" also highlights women who aim for financial independence. Working nonstop to provide for their family, Kashaf and her mother Rafia dispel the myth that women are only dependent on men for financial security by proving their financial capability. Women are empowered by this image because it emphasizes their ability to become economically independent and productive members of society.

By showcasing strong female characters who take charge of their lives and assert their agency, the series also questions conventional gender norms. Kashaf defies social pressure to follow her aspirations and defy conventional expectations, taking control of her own fate in spite of it. She defies the idea that women should confine themselves to predetermined roles and options since she won't obey social standards and pursues her enthusiasm for higher education.

"Zindagi Gulzar Hai" also discusses patriarchy and how it affects women's life. It examines the difficulties women encounter in cultures where men predominate and emphasizes the importance of gender equality. As Zaroon Junaid becomes aware of and confronts his own patriarchal beliefs, his character changes and so do the dynamics of his relationships with the women in his life. Viewers are urged by this representation to critically assess ingrained gender biases and seek to eliminate them.

The show dispels prejudices by featuring women who don't fit into typical gender norms. Although the show emphasizes the value of relationships and family, it does not limit women to being housewives or caregivers. A number of female characters follow their own goals and vocations, including Shehnila, Kashaf's sister, and Sidra, her friend. "Zindagi Gulzar Hai" supports the notion that women can lead complex lives and have agency over their own decisions by showcasing a wide spectrum of female aspirations and talents.

Additionally, by highlighting the difficulties faced by women from various socioeconomic origins, the series illuminates the intersections between gender and class. It draws attention to the inequalities and difficulties encountered by women from underrepresented groups, highlighting the necessity of social and economic equality.

"Zindagi Gulzar Hai" breaks stereotypes and gives women more authority by showing female characters in a progressive light. The show offers a revolutionary story that questions conventional gender roles and encourages



viewers to research and confront prevalent preconceptions by highlighting the value of education, financial independence, agency, and questioning society norms. The show opens the door for societal change and gender equality by showing women in the media in a more inclusive and powerful light through its gripping storytelling.

## V. CONCLUSION

The conservative mindset that Zaroon's persona represents has frequently been criticized for establishing the incorrect standards. However, it appears that *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*'s writer has the belief that men in this region truly behave in this manner, and she is merely serving as a social mirror. Although the gender roles and power structures in the society are reflected in this, Ahmed had the opportunity to criticize them and use the story to push for social change. However, she opted to just highlight the concerns of society. Even though Kashaf encounters the discriminatory practices that the society imposes on women, she defies gender norms by speaking up for herself, voicing her thoughts, and occasionally criticizing Zaroon's patriarchal views.

That being said, it is also true that *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* was a big hit and was adored by many, particularly women. It does make an effort to show women as autonomous, to emphasize the importance of their work and education, and to subtly highlight the ways in which they are oppressed.

The drama was also a big hit in India, which helps to further illuminate the reasons patriarchy is still so prevalent in our countries today. Regardless of the actor's attractiveness, we should all be denouncing these dramas because, in the end, it's popular media that perpetuates patriarchal ideals and makes *zindagi* so "gulzar" (beautiful) for us women.

One can observe that, it is possible for television to produce multifaceted, nuanced female characters that defy preconceptions and highlight the agency, power, and resilience of women around them. These female characters challenge conventional gender norms and expectations while navigating a variety of facets of their lives, such as their jobs, relationships, and personal development. Media has an ability to actively question and analyse patriarchal conventions and hierarchies through television programmes. These programs can encourage viewers to critically assess their own attitudes and actions and promote gender equality by exposing the ways that gender inequality still exists in society.

In order to advance gender equality behind the camera, television feminism will need to go beyond its current forms. More real and varied storytelling can result from promoting the representation of women in executive, producing, directing, and writing positions. Endorsing programs that elevate and magnify the voices of women in the sector can help to foster long-term development. Television presents an opportunity to present global feminist narratives and movements. Television may promote solidarity, cross-cultural understanding, and a worldwide conversation on gender equality by showcasing the hardships and accomplishments of women in many cultural situations. Television series can investigate the possibilities for male involvement and change in the feminist narrative by building on the representation of masculine characters such as Zaroon. These shows can inspire male viewers to critically analyse their own conduct and make a positive contribution to the battle for gender equality by showcasing masculine characters who confront and overcome chauvinistic views.

"Zindagi Gulzar Hai" has gained international recognition with more than million views, demonstrating the influence media may have on promoting feminism-related cross-cultural conversations. Thus we can hope that television may significantly contribute to the advancement of the feminist movement and inspire viewers all around the world by continuing to promote inclusivity and diversity, challenging gender stereotypes, and elevating the voices of marginalized people.

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