

CHOICE, BLAME, AND GENDERED MORALITY IN PAKISTANI DRAMA: AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO *SANWAL YAAR PIYA*

Ahsan Ullah
ahsannasar999@gmail.com

BS Scholar, Department of English, University of Loralai,
Loralai, Balochistan, Pakistan.

Malalai Kakar
malalaikakar309@gmail.com

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Loralai,
Loralai, Balochistan, Pakistan.

Kaleem Ullah
msnkaleem10@gmail.com

BS Scholar, Department of English, University of the
Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Abstract

The Pakistani television dramas make an important contribution to the formation of the general discourse on the issues of gender roles, morality, and social expectations. This paper analyzes the way audiences understand the ideas of female empowerment, male atonement and righteousness in the Pakistani Romantic Melodrama with strong tragic element, *Sanwal Yaar Piya*. The study is based on audience response theory, approaches to gendered moral discourse, and how viewers make meaning out of their emotional reactions, cultural norms, and experience via watching televised stories. The research design employed in the study is a qualitative research design which applies thematic analysis of responses posted by the audience on online platforms. The number of comments made by the audience accessed on publicly accessible discussions on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in regards to the drama, in particular, the frequently discussed final episode, amounted to 700. Thematic analysis of 300 comments that specifically interacted with the themes of gender, morality, attributing blame, and interpreting the audience was chosen after sorting out the irrelevant content (contained the advertisement, emojis, and unrelated observations). Out of this sample, 35 exemplary comments have been chosen that can be used to reflect the most common patterns of interpretation found in the analysis. The results indicate that many audiences presented the male character of Sanwal as a morally better and self-sacrificing hero and the use of personal choice by the female character of Piya was often viewed either as betrayal, selfishness or failure. These reactions mirror larger patriarchal norms attributing feminine virtue to loyalty and sacrifice and giving morally more leeway to the male characters. Simultaneously, even fewer viewers saw that Piya rejects the unequal conditions to get married as a claim of dignity and free will, which means the existence of other moral explanations in the language of the audience. On the whole, the research illustrates that the digital audience actively produces gendered moral senses by commenting on the content online, and they turn the entertainment story into a domain of cultural argument, regulated morality, and reflection.

Keywords: *Audience Response, Digital Audience Discourse, Female Agency, Gendered Morality, Pakistani Television Drama, Sanwal Yaar Piya, Thematic Analysis.*

Corresponding Author: Ahsan Ullah (BS Scholar, Department of English, University of Loralai, Loralai, Balochistan, Pakistan).
Email: bakhtawar.shd@gmail.com

1.Introduction

Television drama plays a pivotal role in the socio-cultural life of Pakistan as it serves as one of the main channels where moral values, gender norms, and social expectations are expressed and spread. Pakistani dramas often touch on issues of family, honor, sacrifice and personal agency, but plots usually exist as highly gendered moral systems. Gender roles are typically instituted in a way that puts female characters in custodial roles of morality and decency compared to male characters who are given the narrative room and moral situational excuses to commit similar acts (Rashid, 2016; Zubair and Farooq, 2020). The television drama in this manner is not merely an entertainment industry, but a potent cultural location, where gendered morality norms are created, reproduced and institutionalized.

Sanwal Yaar Piya is one of the Pakistani television dramas that drew substantial viewership because of the emotionally charged storyline and its scandalous resolution. This narrative is centered on the love story of Sanwal and Piya and it deals with the theme of love, sacrifice, choice and social obligation within the moral structure through the prevailing culture. It is the writing of Hashim Nadeem Khan under the direction of Danish Nawaz, whose work is mostly concentrated in emotional narration and social issues in reputation of the Pakistani television. After airing, the drama brought wide debates on websites especially in regards to the ethical consideration of the choice Piya made and how Sanwal was portrayed as a self-sacrificing character. This high viewer involvement offers a worthy background of exploring the perspectives of viewers in understanding the gendered morality and moral responsibility within the contemporary Pakistani media discourse.

An image of an uneven moral judgement of men and women remains one of the continuing issues with this media landscape, especially in the context of stories that feature the power of personal choice and accountability. The literature on South Asian media relentlessly shows the tendency of women to be monitored more closely, blamed, and judged based on their character more often in situations when they show any form of agency concerning relationships, marriage, or autonomy (Ali, 2018; Kothari, 2019). The moral concepts of honor, shame and virtue are more frequently applied in terms of acts of

women whereas the behavior of men is more contextualized in terms of intent, circumstance or social pressure. Although these asymmetries have been studied quite frequently on the level of representation, there is little empirical insight into the way these moral hierarchies are being actively understood by listeners, re-enacted by viewers or challenged by viewers.

The aim of the present article is informed by the increased importance of the digital audience spaces as the continuation of the public discourse of the moral. As the social media and online commenting will grow, viewers do more and more of the public interpretation by making judgments, evaluations and moral stances about the televised stories. Nevertheless, Pakistani television drama studies have focused much on textual and ideological interpretation of drama texts, providing relatively less interactions with audience reactions as modes of moral meaning-making (Livingstone, 2004; Couldry, 2004). This exclusion is especially scoutmasters in the Pakistani situation, in which the online debate has often been a reflection and magnification of a greater societal discourse about responsibility, morality, gender, and accountability.

This gap is the motivation that paves the way to the foreground of audience discourse as the focal point of analysis in this paper. The artical has used the concept of reader-response and tracks viewers as active decoders that create meaning using culturally installed moral systems instead of passive receivers of the media messages (Hall, 1980; Fish, 1987). As a case study on audience response to *Sanwal Yaar Piya*, the theoretical aim of the research is to establish how far viewers negotiate the issues of agency, blame, and morality as dependent on male and female characters. The methodology of the study consists of a thematic analysis of the commentaries made by the audience with the help of discourse-sensitive interpretation and the use of qualitative tools, which indicates repeated evaluative patterns in the context of digital reception.

The paper is thus informed by three research questions that are targeted and are based on its analysis objectives and research design. It looks at first the way the viewers formulate and understand the concept of personal choice in their assessments of male and female characters in *Sanwal Yaar Piya*. Second, it examines the distribution of blame and responsibility in audience discourse with a specific focus on whether such attributions demonstrate a systematic cross-gendered trend. Third, it deals with the moral and discursive resources to which audiences appeal in order to legitimize, justify, or challenge their moral judgments (by calling on appeals to honor, respectability, religion, or character).

There are four unique contributions that this paper presents to the existing scholarship.

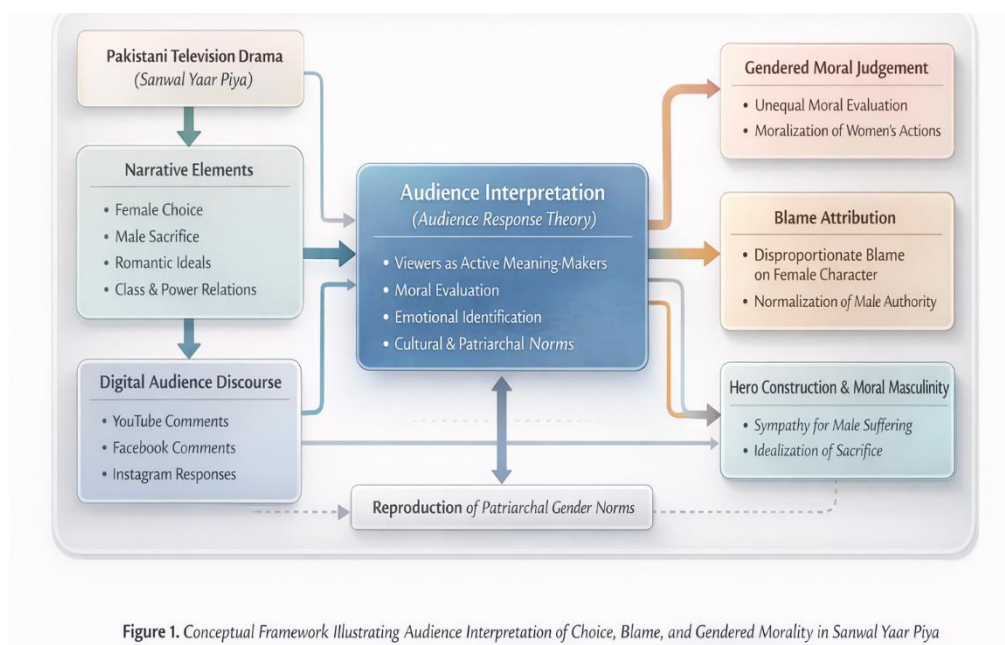
Contribution 1: It pushes the field of Pakistani media studies to a new level of analysis where the emphasis on texts of dramas is turned directly to the reception of the audience, who are depicted as the makers of moral vision.

Contribution 2: It adds to gender studies, as it empirically shows that the application of the concepts of choice and blame concerning male and female characters are disproportionally used in the context of the audience discourse.

Contribution 3: It provides a methodologically sound and rigorous methodology through integrating qualitative thematic analysis and discourse-sensitive interpretation to study massive volume of comments/responses by a specific audience in South Asian online spheres.

Contribution 4: It builds on the contributions of reader-response by locating the interpretations of the audience in the new spaces of online moral regulation and negotiation, namely online comment space, which constitutes a moral space.

The rest of the paper is structured in the following way. Following the Introduction, In the second section, the literature on gender, morality, and reception of the audience is reviewed. It is then accompanied by the description of the methodology used in the study. The next part reports the findings of comments introduced by the audience. The second last section is about Analysis and Interpretations of the data in connection with the available theoretical and cultural discussions. At the end of the paper, a conclusion is made, summarizing major findings, limitations are provided, and future research directions are indicated.



2. Related literature

Television drama is becoming an important and commonly studied area in which the issues of choice, blame, and gendered morality are imagined and negotiated. In other cultures, including Pakistan, where family, honor, and moral respectability are the major cultural values, television dramas are instrumental in setting gender behavior standards that can be followed in society and attributing moral value. The ongoing literature shows that the actions of women in mediated stories are judged by more moralizing concerns than those of men and therefore, drama is a significant space through which morality as gender is produced, normalized and challenged. This part is thus devoted to gender representation, agency of women, moral regulation as well as interpretation of the audience so that this study may fall within the existing scholarly discussions.

There has been a long time debate among feminist media scholars that media is a societal social control kind of cultural institution which strengthens the prevailing moral and gender hierarchies. According to Shaheed (2010), media discourses within the patriarchal societies dictate the behavior of the women since they dictate the moral standards associated with obedience, modesty and sacrifice. Likewise, as claimed by Khan (2014), since women who follow roles outside the traditional characteristics in South Asian media are often depicted as morally dubious, they are blamed in taking control of their flesh. These analyses identify that the concept of gendered morality is systemically encoded in the discourse of media as opposed to it being an accidental characteristic of narration.

However, the studies that are specifically conducted on the Pakistani television dramas allow showing that constructions of ideal womanhood are highly moralized. According to Amin, Fatima, and Ali (2018), dramas influence the level of social awareness because they strengthen the established cultural values revolving around family unity and marital stability. Ashfaq and Shafiq (2018) also demonstrate that the depiction of the ideal woman is controversial but, nevertheless, is based on the patriarchal beliefs, in accordance to which the moral value of women resides in compliance and not autonomy. These works express the fact that morality in Pakistani dramas is deeply correlated with femininity and respectability.

Furthermore, empirical studies of the content of drama show how the morally-characterized types are systematically framed on the use of women. Akhter, Khan, and Ismail (2023) provide quantitative content analysis to prove that female characters in prime-time Pakistani dramas are often characterized by helplessness, moral vulnerability, or troublemakers, whereas there are few representations of independence and authority. Similar statements are made by Shabbir, Farooqui, and Shaikh (2023), who state that dramas are spaces of cultural performance where gender norms and moral values are

replicated with the help of narrative patterns. These representational patterns pre-determine the actions of women to moral assessment and define the perception of agency.

In these ethical systems, female decision and agency seems to be extremely contingent. Even though modern dramas sometimes feature educated or working women, their freedom is regularly limited by plot resolutions that reinstate the traditional gender roles. Farooq and Zubair (2018) suggest that female characters who are independent commonly are being tamed by marriage societal plots that reinforce patriarchal society. The same case is discovered by Iqbal, Hassan, and Irfan (2021) who note that as long as dramas might support the language of empowerment, they also help to perpetuate traditional expectations, which convey contradictory information about the right to choose among women.

In the same way, research studies concerning the social impacts of Pakistani dramas indicate that the shows convey to the audience the acceptable options and the acceptable way of life. Latif, Malik and Nadeem (2021) demonstrate that dramas have great impact on university students perspective on fashion, relationships, and selection spouses, meaning that mediated stories are consciously utilized in everyday moral thinking. This indicates that the representations of choice in dramas are not limited to fiction but are also translated into the social expectations which curtail the significance of delve into the way such representations are construed by the viewers.

On other side, moral judgment of the decision of women in dramas is positively connected with the blame mechanisms. As literature indicates, the moment that female characters violate the roles that society expects of them, it is more likely that they will be constructed as contributors to social transgression or degradation. Khan (2014) and Ashfaq and Shafiq (2018) emphasize the fact that the nonconformance to normative femininity is widely associated with the moral condemnation as opposed to comprehension. Even social problems drama that can focus on issues, individualizes it, and leaves responsibility to women so that the burden of adjustment to the inequalities in the structure is taken by women instead of questioning the structural inequalities (Qayyoun & Khan, 2019).

Comparative studies provide further arguments in support of the idea that visible empowerment is not always a factor that undermines gendered morality. As Hong and Cho (2012) demonstrate, the modification of female main actors roles can represent the social engagement without violating the moral restrictions. Chang and Bairner (2019) also show how women who negotiated both traditional and modernized identities tend to feel empowered, which on the one hand covers other underlying structural continuities. These results are echoed in Pakistani drama literature by contemporary female characters who exist in the conditions of moral control.

The patterns of media further contextualize such patterns in policy-oriented research since they prove that symbolic empowerment is not a guarantee of substantive

equality. Shoukat and Awan (2025) demonstrate that women in Sindh continue to be restricted to patriarchal requirements in regards to political participation regardless of the quota systems. The related research works by Shoukat, Awan, and Jokhiyo (2025) point out the type of unequal distribution of the educational, leadership opportunity and institutional support. These discoveries underscore the reason viewers might be cynical of the media representations of empowerment and still police women decisions by making moral judgments.

A combination of the literature indicates that Pakistan TV drama always recreates gendered moral systems by limiting women in their decisions and blaming non-conformity to standard femininity. Although the representation, influence and ideas content have been studied in detail, relatively little has been done on how these moral structures are actively translated and negotiated by viewers. To fill such a gap, the current study focuses on the reactions of audiences to *Sanwal Yaar Piya* to determine how viewers construct choice, attribute blame, and marshal moral language in the field of digital commentary so as to deepen the existing body of literature on textual analysis to the audience based on moral discourse.

3. Methodology

This research article used a qualitative approach to research in the context of the interpretation and moral judgments held on the audiences regarding the gendered actions in the Pakistani drama. Qualitative thematic analysis provided the basis of the analysis and this method is effective in designing patterns of common meaning in huge amounts of text information. To provide deeper interpretations, the analyses of both the chosen audience responses were analyzed using the insights provided by the critical discourse analysis, especially to determine how language creates gendered discourses of choice, blame, and morality. Theoretically, the reader-response theory informed the study because it considers the audience to be active and construct its meaning using culturally and socially contextualised readings as opposed to passive consumers of mediumistic messages.

Sanwal Yaar Piya was chosen as a deliberate case study because it deals powerfully with the questions of moral accountability, individual agency and gender expectations. The play created a great amount of public discourse on the internet and therefore it was a fitting location to study the process of viewers making moral judgments about the masculine and feminist characters in the play.

Purposive and systematic sampling strategy was used. First of all, episodes and clips that have brought the highest rates of audience engagement, especially the last episode in the form of view counts and comments posted by them were determined. Out of these, the audience comments were sampled in a systematic way where the comments have been selected after the comments were placed in a chronological order thereby minimizing selection bias and made the viewpoints varied.

The data were gathered in February 2026, immediately after the broadcast of the final episode, when audience engagement and discussion were at their peak. A total of 700 audience comments were initially collected from publicly available digital platforms where the drama *Sanwal Yaar Piya* was actively discussed, including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These comments were gathered from episodes and clips that generated the highest viewer engagement, particularly the final episode. After removing duplicate comments, advertisements, emojis, and irrelevant discussions, 300 comments that directly addressed themes related to gender, morality, blame attribution, audience interpretation, and emotional identification were retained for thematic analysis. While the full dataset of 300 comments was used during the coding and thematic analysis process, 35 representative comments were selected and presented in the findings section to illustrate the key interpretive patterns identified in the audience discourse.

All of the chosen comments were gathered into text dataset and given special identification numbers so that it could be analyzed in a systematic manner. In order to provide analytical clarity, and to present the information, these comments were translated into English taking care not to distort the original meaning and tone. Relevant translated texts were applied together with the text. To guarantee anonymity, all the identifying information (usernames and profile details) was deleted.

The methodological process of data collection and analysis is summarized in **Figure 2**.

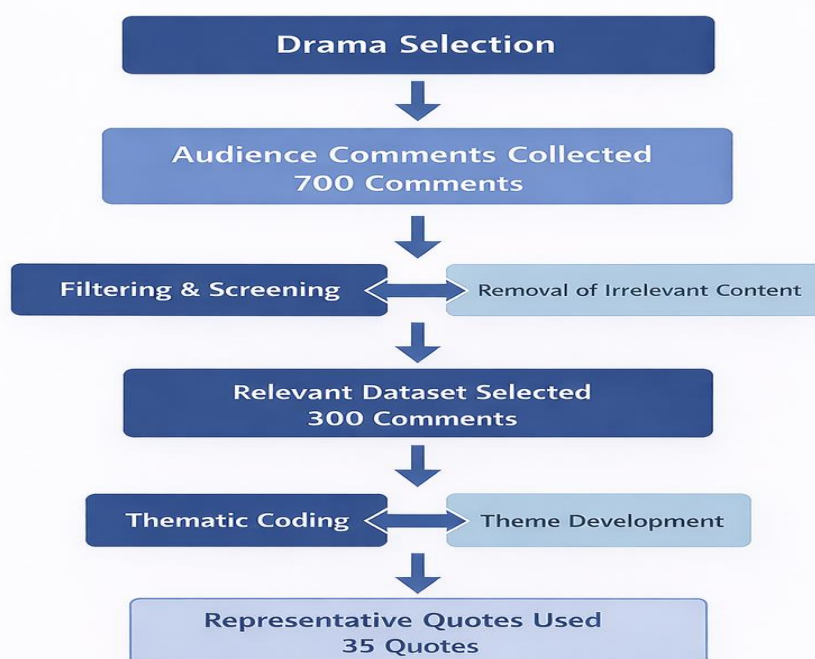


Figure 2. Methodological workflow of the study

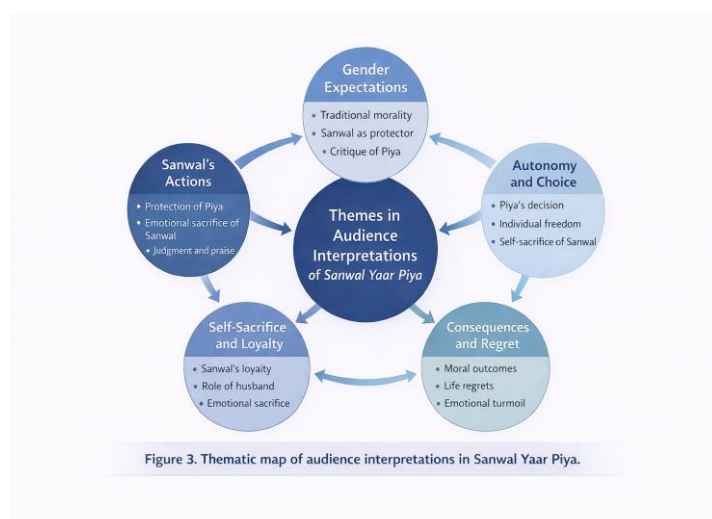
Data analysis was done through thematic analysis process that was done in a repetitive manner. The researcher read the dataset several times to become familiar with it and then preliminary open coding was done to determine the expressions that dealt with moral judgment, agency, gender norms, blame attribution, and justification. Such codes, over time, came to be streamlined and categorized into larger spheres of themes, such as constructions of choice, patterns of blame attribution, moral labeling, and culturally based justifications. After the development of the themes, discourse-analytic insights were used to take closer looks at the selected excerpts to understand how discursive tools like thematic references to honor, respectability, religion and gender norms are espoused in order to dominate or challenge gendered moral expectations.

The issue of ethics was noted during the conduct of the research. Even though the study depended entirely on publicly available online comments, an ethical concern of anonymizing all data and not trying to profile individual commenters was undertaken. It was the study of shared patterns of interpretation and not homodies. The iterative coding method was to provide analytical rigor, constant comparison between the dataset, and reflexive memo-writing in order to reduce researcher bias. Transparency between the data and the analytical claims was made by representative quotations being adopted.

4. Findings

This section summarized the outcomes of the thematic analysis of the audience responses to *Sanwal Yaar Piya* shared on the social media. The interpretation of the viewers concerned the way in which they perceived the decision of the women, laid blame, expressed gendered moral principles, fashioned heroism and connected the narrative with their personal experience. An analysis of comments was done according to five themes that were common across platforms. The introduction of each theme was made by a very short descriptive paragraph, and then the representative comments of the audience are given in their original language with English translation.

The major themes emerging from audience interpretations are visually presented in **Figure 3**.



4.1. When a Woman Chooses: Female Agency as a Moral Problem

The reaction of the audience showed that individual choice in the situation with Piya was hardly being perceived as the right of an individual or an neutral decision in life. However, rather often her agency was represented as morally problematic, disruptive, or irresponsible. The evaluation was based on a system of values that placed greater importance on loyalty, emotional duty and sacrifice and, the viewers indicated unhappiness with women making their own choices contradicting the traditional norms. Those remarks expressed that female independence was frequently considered as a threat towards social normative ethics instead of a statement of individuality.

- “*Piya sirf sanwal ki honi chahiye thii*”
(*Piya should have belonged only to Sanwal.*)
- “*Piya ne apni zindagi ka faisla khud kiya*”
(*Piya made her own life decision.*)

- *(This drama proved that love belongs to the rich; loyalty means nothing, even if someone sacrifices everything.)*
- *“Hum Ne To Ye Drama Sawal Or Piya Ko Ek Karne Ke Liye Dekha Tha”*
(We watched this drama only to see Sanwal and Piya end up together.)
 - *“Pia selfish and peson ki pujari thi bss*
(Piya was selfish and a worshipper of money, nothing more.)
 - *“Koi itna ehsan framosh b ho Sakta he???”*
(Can someone really be this ungrateful?)
 - *“Zaroori tu nahi heroine ki shadi hero se hi hojayn*
(It is not necessary that the heroine must marry the hero.)
- *“Acha insan hona aur shadi ke liye compatible hona alag baat hai”*
(Being a good person and being compatible for marriage are two different things.)

4.2. Blame Placed on the Woman: Moral Policing of Piya

The findings indicated that blame was always and imbalanced against Piya. The viewers often blamed her to be the cause of emotional sufferings, narrative unfairness, and relationship failure. Even instead of placing her actions in social and structural context, viewers emphasized the importance of her character, motives, and ethics. This trend showed that there was a powerful inclination to carry out moral policing in the conduct of females, where negative consequences were attributed to personal blame and not collective blame.

- *“Bachian peso ki ghulaam”*
(Girls are slaves of money.)
- *“Yes Sanwal ko Piya neh dhokha diya”*
(Yes, Piya betrayed Sanwal.)
- *“Piya ne sanwal ke jazbat se khela aur akhir mein chor diya”*
(Piya played with Sanwal’s emotions and abandoned him in the end.)

- *“Aisi larkian hamesha maslay paida karti hain”*
(Such girls always create problems.)
- *“Public ko bewakoof bana rahi thi”*
(She was fooling the public.)
 - *“Disappointed”*
(Disappointed.)
- *“Piya 1 red carpet thi”*
(Piya was a red flag.)
- *“Piy nay Sawnal ko use kia jesy sb larkian krti a Rahi”*
(Piya used Sanwal, just like girls have always been doing.)
 - *“Piya ko b Green card chaye tha.”*
(Piya also wanted a green card.)

4.3. Different Rules for Men and Women: Gendered Moral Standards

The comments were analyzed based on the apparent differences in the assessment of the male and female characters. It is stated that actions that Piya did were examined and ethically assessed but when considerations were made on male characters, they were usually forgiven or not addressed at all. The audience seemed to accept the male principles of power, authority, and decision-making as a matter of norm, and imposed more moral responsibilities on women of patience and sacrifice. This imbalance brought out the existence of gendered moral expectations inherent in audience perceptions.

- *“Sanwal ke paas paisa nahi tha is liye woh reject ho gaya”*
(Sanwal was rejected because he did not have money.)
- *“Beautiful drama, horrible ending!!! Changed the entire trajectory of the drama because it made no sense at all. If she ended up with Sanwal this would have been a different ending compared to other dramas by defining the meaning of true love. Sanwal stood by her side even though it was not his battle, he became her anchor!”*
- *“Sawal k sth itna bada zulum ni hona chahiye”*
(Such a great injustice should not have happened to Sanwal.)

- *“Sanwal ka kia ksoor tha”*
(What was Sanwal’s fault?)
- *“Larki se hamesha sabr ki umeed hoti hai”*
(Patience is always expected from a woman.)
- *“Mard ki ghalti majboori hoti hai”*
(A man’s mistake is considered a compulsion.)
- *“Amir mard ke liye sab kuch halal hota hai”*
(Everything is acceptable for a rich man.)

4.4. Sanwal as the Ideal Man: Sympathy, Sacrifice, and Moral Heroism

The findings also indicated that Sanwal was the constant ethical and emotional focus of the story. People were impressed by the fact that he is patient, endures and could sacrifice personal happiness. The agony he experienced was understood as the manifestation of honesty and ethical culture instead of agency failure. With these answers, viewers were able to create their own ideal image of masculinity that was based on indomitable silence and suppression of emotion.

- *“Asal hero to Sanwal hai”*
(Sanwal is the real hero.)
- *“Sanwal sacrificed his happiness for piya”*
(Sanwal sacrificed his happiness for Piya.)
- *Arey yr har achey insaan k sath yhi hota”*
(This is what always happens to every good person.)
- *“Sanwal proof that mohabbat ko pana hi mohabbat nahi hota”*
(Sanwal proves that love is not just about attaining it.)
- *“Aisay mard real life mein kam hotay hain”*
(Men like this are rare in real life.)

4.5. When the Story Became Personal: Audience Experience and Emotional Identification

Lastly, the data found that lots of viewers could associate the story with their lives and their emotional relationships. There were expressions of heartbreak, regret and recognition by the audience which showed that they are strongly emotionally connected

with the characters. It is most likely that in most occasions the drama was not viewed as something fictitious as entertainment but as something that paralleled to real life relationships and disappointments. This individual participation enhanced moral responses and created a stronger audience interest in the story resolution.

- “*Sanwal ki kahani meri zindagi jaisi hai*”
(*Sanwal’s story feels like my own life.*)
- “*Yeh drama sirf kahani nahi ek experience hai*”
(*This drama is not just a story; it is an experience.*)
- “*Ending dekh kar apni yaadein taaza ho gayin*”
(*Watching the ending refreshed my own memories.*)
 - “*Dil toot gaya yeh end dekh kar*”
(*My heart broke after watching this ending.*)
- “*Watching it is like signing up for lifetime regret*”
(*Watching it felt like signing up for a lifetime of regret.*)
- “*Yeh drama meri kahani lagti hai*”
(*This drama feels like my story.*)

5. Discussion and Interpretation

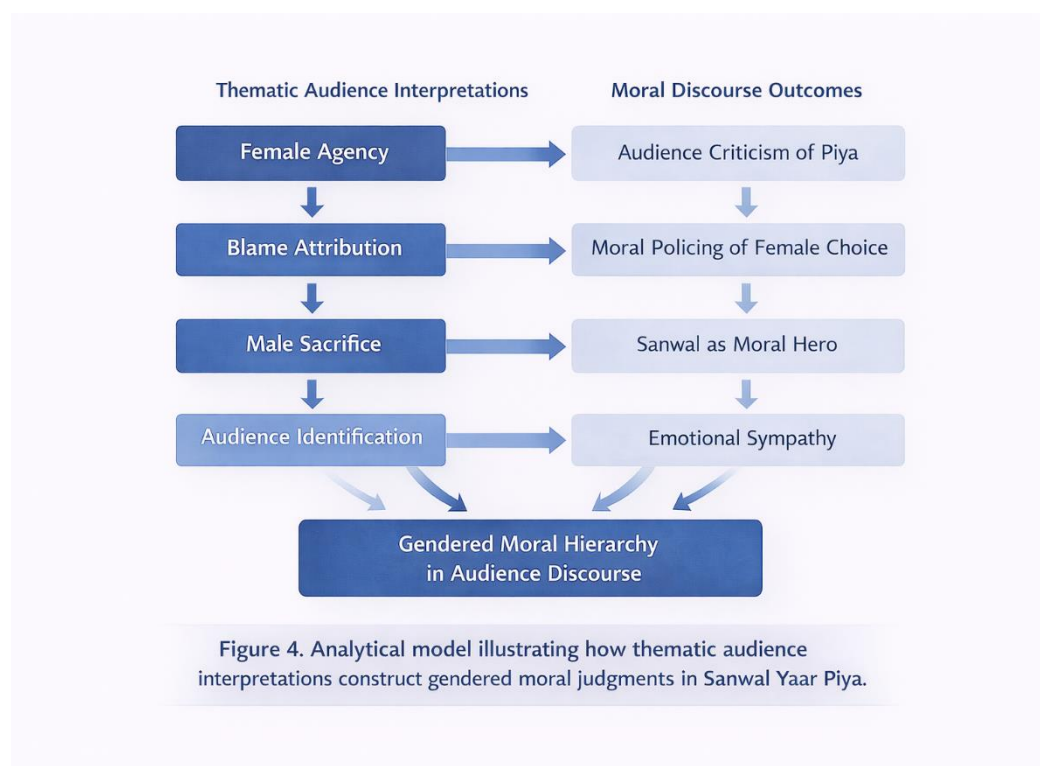
This section of the paper has explained and analyzed how the audience reacts to *Sanwal Yaar Piya* utilizing the concept of audience response theory where the viewers are viewed as active meaning-creators, as opposed to mere consumers of media programs. Using thematic analysis of online commentaries as a method of qualitative research, the interpretation aimed at the viewers constructing the moral meaning of choice, blame, love, and gender. The results demonstrated that morality in the play was not established in the plot, but created during the audience interpretation and conditioned by the culturally embedded concepts of gender roles and emotional obligation.

In terms of audience reception, the audience did not unquestioningly read Piya actions as plot elaboration, but critiqued her decisions concerning the existing moral theories. It was demonstrated in the analysis that female choice was understood as a moral disorder instead of autonomous agency and demonstrated how the audiences transferred the patriarchal imperative to the interpretation of the text. The meaning, according to the reader-response theory, is created when text interacts with the reader, and in this situation, the audience interpretations were imbued with strongly held ideas about the social role of women to maintain emotional fidelity. The hesitation and refusal shown by Piya was then

explained not as an aspect of deliberative decision but as the instance of moral inconsistency, an aspect that showed the reinforcement of the dominant gender norms through audience meaning-making processes.

The broader analytical relationships between the identified themes and the construction of gendered moral discourse are illustrated in **Figure 4**

The blame acted as a focal interpretive approach whereby viewers governed sexual activities among women. Instead of sharing blame among characters or social



circumstances, viewers shared the blame on emotional harm on Piya overwhelmingly. According to audience-response perspective, this unveiled the way the viewers occupied narrative gaps with culturally conversant interpretations that put moral responsibility at the forefront of criticism rather than structure. Male figures were considered more flexible in terms of morality because of their actions as they were in context of their intent, schools, or situations. Such disparate treatment of interpretation indicated that gendered forms of moral hierarchy were reproduced by the viewers and listeners in the process of engagement with the drama.

Sanwal interpretation also demonstrated the manner in which the reception of the audience formed the moral masculinity. His suffering and bearing contributed to sincerity and moral depth and raised one-sided love as the ultimate form of emotional authenticity, and this is how it was interpreted by his viewers. According to the interpretations of reader-

response, viewers turned to Sanwal emotionally and associated ideal-like resilience and sacrifice to his character. Such interpretation agreement expressed moral judgment whereby pain of Sanwal was idolized and the indecisiveness of Piya was despised. These results therefore showed that the interpretations of the audience favored the male suffering as a morally significant one and labeled the complexities of female emotions with suspicions.

Audience response theory also helped explain reactions to the final episode, particularly the scene in which Aliyar told Piya, “*Main aap ko aik qeemti jaagir ki tarah rakhunga*” (*I will keep you like a valuable property*). This statement encoded patriarchal ownership within the narrative; however, its moral significance was realized through audience interpretation. Piya’s refusal and her assertion that she would marry only when she stood in equality with Aliyar represented a moment of resistance within the text. Yet audience interpretations of this moment remained divided. Many viewers interpreted her refusal not as a rejection of objectification but as further evidence of moral instability, indicating that audience meaning-making often overrode the narrative’s critical potential.

The importance of the personal experience in the interpretation of the audience was the most important. Spectators often read the play in their own emotional background irrespective of whether there had been unreturned love and sacrifice. Audience response theory is more focused on the fact that readers enter the interpretive process with their own recollections and emotions which in the present research was proven correct as the reader morality was created not by the narrative logic but by personal experience. When people referred to Sanwal emotionally, moral judgments were heightened and there was also the rejection of other narrative choices which did not conform with anticipated emotional justice.

The controversy surrounding the ending, including the director’s public defense of tragic love as “true love,” further highlighted the autonomy of audience interpretation. Although the classic tragic romance explanations were made by authors, they had little impact on the viewers that gave such explanations since the end of the movie was seen as a moral betrayal and not as an artistic declaration. On the part of audience response, this re-action showed that meaning remained imminent by the audience, but was negotiated by the audience whose moral investments rested in emotional attachment and gendered expectations.

All these readings together proved the fact that audience reactions to Sanwal Yaar Piya served as a place of producing the moral. Meanings created by viewers were active constructions that strengthened patriarchal principles, moralized women choice, and feminized male sacrifice. Through the application of the audience response theory, the researcher was able to prove that Pakistani television drama is more than a form of

narrative, it is a cultural domain where gendered morality is constantly being interpreted, reaffirmed and challenged by the audience discourse.

6. Conclusion

This paper analysed the audience perception of choice, blame, and gendered morality using the example of the Pakistani TV drama *Sanwal Yaar Piya* in the foregrounding of audience discourse as a moral sense-making location. Relying on the audience response theory and the thematic analysis of the online comment in form of qualitative materials, the study revealed that viewers did not passively judge something moral or not, as this moral judgment construction was actively triggered by the events of the narrative. The results have shown that women personal decisions were often moralised and viewed as disruptive, and male sacrifice and emotional suffering were promoted as a sign of verisimilitude and virtue. Audience interpretations were consistent in herding patriarchal morality of distributing unequal blame on the female character in favor of male authority and privileged suffering in the name of true love. Even narrative adherence like the denial of property and statement of equality was frequently recomposed in terms of suspicion and moral uncertainty. In ways which alter the analytical paradigm of the presence of representation to an analysis of audience interpretation, the study underscored how popular television drama can serve as a cultural place where the expression of gender norms and moral hierarchies are not only represented but also actively supported through the interaction of the audience. By doing that, this research helped gain a better insight into the circulation of morality, gender and power in the modern Pakistani media culture as it goes beyond the textual plane.

6.1. Future Directions

Further research can be developed by this study in terms of the reaction of audiences of various Pakistani dramas to determine whether the same tendencies toward gendered moral interpretation are similar in different drama genres and in different stories. Comparative research on the male and female audiences may shed more light on gender, age as well as social status and how they influence the moral judgment. Also, cross-platform analysis can identify the variation in the interpretive practices across the communities of YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. This would also benefit by seeking to determine how viewers consciously construct their moralisms by including interviews or focus groups. Lastly, upcoming research can also look at how the transformation in social discourses related to gender equality affects the audience interpretation in the long run, especially female agency and challenge.

6.2. Data Availability Statement

The information that was used in this study was the publicly available audience comments on the social media platforms related to the television drama *Sanwal Yaar Piya*. All the identifiers were eliminated and comments were stripped of their identities to

preserve the privacy of users. Because of ethical reasons and policies of the platform, the complete dataset is not publicly released but can be requested by the author under reasonable considerations.

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