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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**The Portrayal of Gender Equality through Empowered Females  
Characters in Pakistani Animated TV Shows**

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**ABSTRACT**

The research aims to understand how Pakistani animated TV shows are portraying gender equality through empowered female characters. Animations are very motivating and it is believed that they enhance some of our cognitive demands of learning therefore 2D and 3D animated TV shows or videos are used globally to spread awareness among people about gender equality through showing powerful female characters. A qualitative research design has been adopted and through the critical discourse analysis of the animated TV shows, it has been analyzed that their content contains the concept of powerful female characters and hence contributes towards promoting gender equality. Hence, three animated TV shows "Quaid se Baten", "Burqa Avengers", and "team Muhafiz" were selected for the study and one episode of each animated TV show will be chosen through purposive sampling. The research shows that the portrayal of empowered female characters in Pakistani animated TV shows not only promote gender equality but also serve as a medium to inculcate progressive values in society. The study highlights the potential of Pakistani animated shows as a transformative force for gender equality and women empowerment. It is observed that rare studies are available in this domain while there is really big space available for social, mass communication and gender studies scholars to explore this domain as animated content is growing day by day and putting great impact on its viewers so animated content is being used to spread awareness about crucial topics.

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**KEYWORDS** Animation, Animated TV Shows, Gender equality, Women Empowerment

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**Introduction**

This is evident generally that media plays an important role in building perception and shaping public opinions about social topics. It also creates awareness about various concepts including gender equality and women empowerment. This is also explained by many studies that animation has a powerful impact on children for the promotion of positive values and encourages critical thinking in alpha generation.

Gender equality also remained an important topic throughout history but gained significant recognition in the recent past and became a hot topic around the globe. Now the world is significantly moving towards a better world where every individual may have equal opportunities without any gender discrimination. Therefore, this is the need of hour to spread awareness about gender equality and concepts linked with this to build positive opinion about this. Therefore gender equality has become a crucial topic from literature to movies. To spread awareness about this important topic on grass root level

Animated cartoons are also adopting this as a subject. They are not only trying to portray gender equality by showing more female characters but empowered female characters.

Like other regions Pakistani Animated shows present strong messages about the importance of gender equality by showing female superheroes and empowered female characters. These messages may inspire generation alpha to strive for gender equality and work towards creating a more balanced society which is above every kind of gender discrimination.

One Pakistani Animated show that portrays gender equality and women empowerment is "Burka Avengers". This animated show was created by Unicorn black a studio based in Islamabad. The theme of this animated show moves around gender equality, girl's education and women empowerment. This is the first show which introduced the first female superhero in the Animated Entertainment Industry of Pakistan. This show follows the efforts of female superheroes who use their special powers to fight against the villainous Baba Bandok who is the representative of Patriarchy and against women empowerment and girl's education. The main characters of this series have different abilities which they are using to defeat all those elements who are against gender equality, girl's education and women empowerment. This show has won many awards for promoting gender equality and women rights.

Quaid sae Batein is another Pakistani Animated TV show which is the part of our sample, this show was created by Daniyal Noorani and broadcasted on Geo. This is also promoting gender equality and women empowerment by showing Zainab as a little girl as their lead character. Zainab is a very sensitive character who observes social disorders and then takes lead on them to fix. This show's multiple episodes talk about gender equality and girl's abilities. Also this show is discouraging all those concepts which promote gender inequality.

Team Muhafiz is an animated thriller which was created by ISPR and broadcasted by Geo. This series shows a team of youngsters who are fighting about social evils and mafias behind them. This show is truly encouraging gender equality by showing empowered female characters. One of the female characters, Parinaaz who is leading the team is a hockey player who represents women empowerment. The best part of this show is that all characters belong to different regions of Pakistan and are inspired by real characters, another female character is Mahnoor who is a young girl from Hunza and expert of Martial Art while another powerful female character Arya belongs to Hindu Community of Sindh. Half of the team members are female and carry strong characters.

So this study is exploring how these Pakistani Animated TV Shows are presenting female characters and examining how these shows are helpful in creating awareness about gender equality by showing empowered female characters.

The existing literature explains that animated series or movies can be useful tool for promoting gender equality by showing empowered female characters. However, further research is required in Pakistani perspective to explore how Pakistani Animated TV Shows are promoting the concept of gender equality through female characters.

## **Literature Review**

According to Cambridge Dictionary, animation is defined as a process by which an animation movie or TV show is created from drawings made by hand or computer

(Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). The roots of animated entertainment can be traced back thousands of years to Iran. A Bronze Age pottery bowl, Shah-E-Sukhteh, depicts a goat leaping. This is considered the earliest form of animation, dating back to approximately 3000 B.C. (Santos, 2020).

Animation continued its journey in multiple forms throughout history. Today, the animation or animated entertainment industry owes much of its popularity to the efforts of Walt Disney. Walt Disney introduced the first computer-made animated movie, *Toy Story*, in 1995, which is considered a turning point for the animation industry (Disney, 2020). Due to its popularity, the animation industry is growing worldwide. According to Zion Market Research, the global animation market was worth approximately \$371 billion and is expected to reach around \$580 billion by 2032 (Zion Market Research, n.d.). Many studies have explored the power of animation as a tool that significantly impacts viewers, especially children.

A study conducted in the Indian state of Kerala examined the influence of animated content on children. This experimental research involved 240 school-going students, aged 7–15, of both genders. The study found that animated films can change the attitude and behavior of viewers. The children imitated violent stunts shown in these films and sought accessories inspired by animated content (Wang, & Pan, 2024). Another study conducted in Ghana examined how animated TV shows and films reshape the behavior of Ghanaian youth. It highlighted that animated content significantly contributes to children's learning and behavioral formation, both positively and negatively. It aids in learning new concepts, language development, and cultivating cognitive skills (Awinkeligo, Churcher, Wemegah, & Narh, 2022).

Furthermore, animated content also influences children's primary religious beliefs. Research by Pakistani scholars revealed that exposure to the animated Hindu religious movie *Krishna* impacted the religious views of Muslim children. The study found that many children were more familiar with Krishna and Hindu beliefs than their own religion, leading to a distorted perception of their faith (Nasir & Malik, 2014).

Animation has become an integral part of many industries, particularly entertainment media and education, due to its significant impact on understanding complex phenomena (Rizwan, 2023). A study conducted in Dhaka, Bangladesh, involved primary school students exposed to animated videos explaining the solar system. The results showed that students displayed greater enthusiasm and learning outcomes when exposed to animated educational materials compared to traditional methods (Islam, Ahmed, Islam, & Shamsuddin, 2014). Similarly, an experimental study in Pakistan on students from grades 3–6 revealed that animation effectively captures attention, improves retention through colorful imagery, and enhances active involvement in learning (Asif et al., 2023).

Animation is widely used to teach new concepts and spread awareness about important issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, animations played a crucial role in educating the public. A study conducted in Tamil Nadu, India, explored the role of anthropomorphized animals in animated TV shows in promoting environmental awareness. It found that children not only understood environmental issues through these shows but also engaged in eco-friendly activities. Animation's ability to simplify complex phenomena makes it an effective educational tool (Shanmugapriy, & Christopher, 2024).

As gender equality has become a significant media topic, many studies have examined its portrayal in animated content globally. In Turkey, research on the cartoon series *Pepee* highlighted gender stereotypes in character actions, clothing, and roles. The study concluded that *Pepee* contained messages promoting gender inequality (Kalaycı, 2015).

A U.S.-based study analyzed Disney animated movies such as *Cinderella*, *Mulan*, and *Moana*, revealing that earlier films carried more stereotypical traits, while newer films depicted stronger female characters and better representation. However, male characters still dominated in terms of number and narrative significance (Jimenez, 2021).

A Pakistani study by Zaheen, Manzoor, & Safdar (2020) analyzed gender roles in children's cartoons. It emphasized that male characters are often dominant, while females are portrayed in supportive roles, reinforcing stereotypes. The study called for more balanced and diverse representations of genders in children's media to promote healthier socialization.

### **Material and Methods**

The research focuses on understanding the portrayal of women in Pakistani animated shows to shed light if women shown are empowered or not. For this purpose, a qualitative approach is considered as the appropriate research design with critical discourse analysis being the chosen research technique which provides a way to have a broad and in depth insight into the matter under discussion. A number of media researchers have considered CDA as a way to analyze media text and images (Ottosen, 2010; Ross, 2006). The researchers have opted the way VanDijk focussed on the wider aspects of social and political contexts in addition to focusing on the linguistics.

Three animated TV series "Quaid se Baten", "Burqa Avengers", and "team Muhafiz" have been selected for the study and one episode of each animated TV show has been chosen through purposive sampling. The episodes of these animated series have been taken from Youtube and these were transcribed for further in depth analysis of the topic under study.

In this study, the sample of one animated video from each of the three animated TV series have been selected on the basis of purposive sampling. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) stated the idea of purposive sampling is selected as the arbitrary method being a representative of the total population; it tends to pick out the sample in relation to some criterion, as per the requirement of the particular study (Saleem, Maqsood, & Abbasi, 2022). A purposive sample is appropriate in case of special emphasis on certain specific variables like the variable of good governance in the case of a problem under study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study has been completed by critical discourse analysis on the Animated TV Shows which are already published and available on youtube so no ethical restrictions were there while doing this research.

### **Results and Discussion**

The episode selected from Quaid se Baatein challenges social norms related to gender roles and advocates women empowerment. It shows the journey of Zainab to

challenge the norms that limit women's role in society. The story begins with Ali confronting Zainab for playing cricket and declaring it the sport exclusive for boys, further adding that girls should play with dolls. This confrontation is the depiction of the societal concept that constrains women to domestic roles only. It reflects on the gender stereotype to discourage women from participating in the male-dominated activities. This discussion made Zainab question this societal normalization of girls restricted within the boundaries of home playing with dolls and boys freely playing outdoor games. She challenges Ali that she can play cricket equally as well as Ali does. This shows the self confidence and determination that Zainab possesses and positions her as a confident character that challenges social norms serving as a role model.

In the next scene, Zainab's father calls her inside declaring that it's getting dark. However, he doesn't call Ali to come home. This is also an indication of the societal norm that allows women outside home only for a limited timespan. When Zainab asks him why she can't play cricket he responds by saying that it is the societal value to make women learn cooking and to allow boys to play cricket. Although he doesn't seem to enforce this but does passively accept the gender norms to move in the society. This shows the support of his father and that the barrier to not play cricket especially in the dark is not the intrinsic value of her father, rather this is merely the acceptance of societal norms, maybe due to the inability to challenge them. The positive point here was that her father was not forcing restrictions on her.

Another scene in which discussion revolves around gender is when Quaid comes in the dream of Zainab and tells her the importance of women working side by side with the men for the survival of any country. This shows the foundation ideology behind making Pakistan a free nation. This shows a historical perspective about the importance of women empowerment for nation building.

The strongest quotation of the whole episode is the saying of Quaid "There are two powers in this world; the power of the sword and second, the power of the pen. But there is a power more great than these two: the power of the women." This positions the role of women as a transformative agency and the most powerful change-makers.

Cricket is a male-dominated sport but when Zainab challenges Ali, she becomes a metaphor of an empowered and self-aware woman and her successful 6 strike symbolizes the potential of women to excel in a socially male-dominated sport.

The narrative then takes a shift from women empowerment to collective empowerment when Zainab invites Ali to play cricket. This is how Zainab turns her victory into the national call-to-action and urges viewers to create a more inclusive society.

The next animated show in which the themes of women empowerment were analyzed is Episode 1 of *Burka Avenger*. This series revolves around Jiya, who turns into *Burka Avenger*, which is the most empowered role in the whole series. Her dual roles in the episode is indicative of the fact that women can very efficiently manage multiple roles. As a teacher she emphasizes upon the importance of education while as *Burqa Avenger*, she uses martial arts to challenge oppression. The series represents women as an agent of change instead of imparting them passive roles in society. The commitment of Jiya to ensure the operationalization of girls school strengthens the narrative of women empowerment through education.

This show breaks the stereotypes and challenges traditional norms and gender roles through action and dialogue. Jiya makes use of her martial arts with books and pens as weapons to emphasize upon the importance of education as a tool for women empowerment. Moreover, Ashu is another character who speaks up against the oppression of school closure and courageously advocates in favor of women education in front of oppressors. Another empowered female character is the female anchor who criticizes the closure of schools and plays the role of women in the media advocating for change.

This episode also highlights the patriarchal and misogynistic characters of our society in the form of Baba Bandoor and Vadero Pajero. Their derogatory remarks on women's education and gender stereotypes highlight unjust societal norms. Their oppression and mockery serve Jiya a challenge to struggle against the patriarchal norms.

The most important part of this series is the recontextualization of the concept of Burqa, which was traditionally considered a symbol of modesty and cultural identity. This series relates the burqa as a symbol of strength and empowerment.

The third animated video to analyse using qualitative discourse analysis for the themes of gender equality and women empowerment is "Team Muhafiz". The basic level of equality can be observed in the number of members and equal distribution against the both genders. Team Muhafiz comprises of 6 members, Parinaaz, Mahnoor, and Aarya being the female members and Zane, Reza, and Badshah Khan being the male member of Team Muhafiz. This challenges the dominance of male characters in the action-oriented storylines and depicts that females are equally involved in problem solving considering it a collective responsibility.

The opening scene of the animated video shows Parinaaz playing hockey. This challenges the cultural stereotype of not allowing women any outdoor sport. Various times in the episode, we can see female characters taking the lead. Parinaaz communicates and coordinates between badshah khan and the team positioning herself as a decision maker and a team leader. This is how she challenges the stereotypes of considering women as passive actors and playing supportive roles. The portrayal of Mahnoor as chasing the sniper in the presence of male team members Reza and Zane shows her bravery and physical strength. This questions the common notion of considering women less capable of doing tasks that require physical activity. Moreover, when she gets the news of fire in the village, she raises concerns which portrays her willingness to address societal issues. This depicts the importance of women's voices in combating environmental and community issues.

The logical demeanor of Parinaaz in response to the playful remark by Zane (make Rawka understand in his own way) shows the unique perspectives that women may bring to critical situations. In the mission against Rawka and his gang, all the team members can be observed taking an equal participation despite their genders, highlighting an equitable approach. The female characters can be observed showing empathy for the victims of the village while also suggesting logical solutions to address the problem and break the stereotype of females being irrational or overly emotional. The inclusion of women in the matters of nature protection reinforces their roles as environmental activists striving for sustainability.

The content discourse analysis of the Pakistani animated TV shows portray that these shows serve to challenge gender stereotypes, and promote inclusivity through

empowered female characters. When it comes to **challenging societal norms**, the analysis of selected episodes from *Quaid se Baatein* shows that by playing cricket, a male dominated sport and also showing good performance, Zainab encourages the young audience and especially females to strive for a more inclusive society.

The analysis of *Burka Avenger* shows that the dual roles, Jiya as a teacher and *Burka avenger* as a superhero portrays that women can take on and balance multiple responsibilities. The action and intellect of *Burqa Avenger* and her fight with the evil of society shows that women are capable of anything they want to do.

Moving forward to *Team Muhafiz*, the equal representation of female characters, Parinaaz, Mahnoor, and Aarya disrupts the stereotypes of weakness linked to women. The participation of female characters as equal participants in problem-solving and action-oriented tasks challenge the stereotypes of women being passive participants. By showing Parinaaz playing hockey in the *Team Muhafiz* and Zainab playing cricket in *Quaid se Baatein*, the show normalizes gender equality and breaks stereotypes.

To ensure a more inclusive society, the show encourages collective action. By showing how all the members of *Team Muhafiz* are playing their roles in solving critical issues without any gender discrimination and how Zainab invites Ali to play after her winning shot, these animated shows are promoting inclusivity and gender equality. Such narratives encourage young audiences to consider gender equality and inclusion as a shared responsibility.

The analysis of these three animated videos show that the concept of empowerment in these series is linked with gender equality. Because empowered female characters challenge the patriarchal societal norms and stereotypes and advocate for equal rights and opportunities for women.

These shows promote women empowerment by showing confident female characters like Zainab, Jiya, Parinaaz, Mahnoor, and Aarya. These characters embody excellence, take on leadership roles and pursue their goals by contributing towards the society equally with men.

The characters like *Vadero Pajero*, *Baba Bandoor*, *Ali* and *Zainab's father* throw light on the patriarchal ideology prevailing in our society. The incorporation of these characters serve to explain the social constraint on women, like devoiding them of their right to get education, stopping them from playing outdoor and male-dominated sports. The presence of these characters encourage viewers to recognize similar norms in their society and challenge them for a more empowered and inclusive society. The scenes of Zainab playing cricket and Parinaaz playing hockey portrays how these females are empowered enough to break barriers in male-dominated areas. Moreover, the characters of Parinaaz, Mahnoor, and Aarya performing in leadership roles are the representation of women empowerment and equality.

The importance given to the subject of girls' education in *Burka avengers* through the use of pens and books as weapons show that these are tools of empowerment for women.

*Burqa* is considered as a symbol of modesty, however, the character of *Burka avenger* portrays it as a sign of empowerment while very subtly addressing cultural sensitivity. These shows project women as taking non-traditional and leadership roles

like activist, athletes, educators, team leaders, journalists. This is how they strengthen the idea that women can equally play their part in societal well-being and can take on roles in the fields historically dominated by the male members of the society. The normalization of women in empowered roles is a step towards creating a society which encourages girls to break barriers to achieve gender equality. These shows portray the resilience of female characters like Zainab to challenge the societal norm that girls cannot play cricket and of Jiya against Baba Bandook who wanted to close girls school. It also highlights the resistance faced by women and encourages the audience to challenge these discriminatory practices. Another important aspect portrayed by the empowered women is their contribution towards societal wellbeing, depicting that equality benefits all.

## **Conclusions**

The critical discourse analysis of one episode selected through purposive sampling from *Burka Avenger*, *Quaid se Baatein* and *Team Muhafiz* shows a significant role of these animated TV shows in promoting the themes of gender equality and women empowerment. To address the concept of gender equality among young audiences, these series use visual representation, storytelling and relatable characters. Female characters in these series like Jiya, Parinaaz and Zainab can be seen as empowered characters in leadership roles. These characters challenge gender stereotypes and participate in male-dominated societies to advocate for an inclusive society. The themes of education, sport and critical issue solving shows the way gender equality results in societal progress and nation building. The characters of Vadero Pajero and Baba Bandook represent the patriarchal barriers that women may face in society. The resistance faced by Zainab and her determination shows how women can fight societal limitations. The double role of Jiya in *Burka Avenger* is the depiction of how women can be intelligent and physically strong at the same time to compete with anything that may hinder her way to empowerment. The role of Mahnoor, Parinaaz and Aarya in *Team Muhafiz* highlight the equal representation of women in combating societal issues while working side by side with men. These animated shows also serve to bridge the gap between empowerment and equality by portraying an empowered girl Zainab inviting Ali to play cricket with her fostering equality and inclusivity. The research shows that the portrayal of empowered female characters in Pakistani animated TV shows not only promote gender equality but also serve as a medium to inculcate progressive values in society. The study highlights the potential of Pakistani animated shows as a transformative force for gender equality and women empowerment.

## **Recommendations**

It is observed that rare studies are available in this domain while there is really big space available for social, mass communication and gender studies scholars to explore this domain as animated content is growing day by day and putting great impact on its viewers so animated content is being used to spread awareness about crucial topics. A few recommendations are here.

1. Portrayal of Women Roles in Islamic Cartoons like *Ghulam Rasool & Kaneez Fatima* by Dawat e Islami
2. Comparative analyses of Pakistani Animated Shows & Indian Animated show for the awareness of gender equality.
3. Portrayal of female characters by 2D animated shows by Pakistani Creators.



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