

REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER RELATIONS AND AFGHAN AUDIENCES' RECEPTION

**REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER RELATIONS IN TURKISH SOAP OPERAS AND
AFGHAN AUDIENCES' RECEPTION**

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Abstract

Although efforts have been made by the Afghan government and its international partners to promote the tents of gender equality in Afghan society, biases against women and other marginalized groups persist in the society and media sector, particularly. The current study is a timely research because feminist media studies are an under-researched field in the context of Afghanistan. My research aims to be a contribution to this field and open a path for Afghan feminist media studies. The current study explores the representations of gender relations in transnational television soap operas broadcast on Afghan television stations, audiences' decoding of the representations, and the role of the media in promoting social change. The selected soap operas for the study are Paiman and Qesay Maa, Turkish television soap operas dubbed in the Dari language. The current study is based on feminist theory and feminist methodology, providing a balance of content and reception analysis. Drawing on feminist media studies and focusing on media representations, the content analysis of transnational soap operas echoed previous studies on representations of gender relations and indicated that gender relations are often portrayed in stereotypical and traditional manners. The content analysis further demonstrated that women are objectified in different ways and are often represented as domestic, passive, selfless beings in men's service. Moreover, relationships between women are often based on rivalry, hatred, and shaming and often without any particular reason. The study also found that contrary to women, men are often represented at outdoor and professional settings. Additionally, grounded on encoding/decoding model through a feminist lens, the thematic analysis of focus group discussions demonstrated that audiences constantly interact with media text and actively make meaning. Interestingly, FGD findings further indicated that as active viewers, both female and male participants, derive multiple and often diverse meanings from the media text. Although both

female and male participants problematize the content of transnational soap operas, their interpretations of representations of gender relations and gender equality are dissimilar. The study concludes that transnational soap operas, and the media in general, can play an important role in promoting social change in Afghanistan, particularly gender parity through the Entertainment-Education strategy. However, an intersectional framework is essential in designing EE programmes for promoting gender equality in a diverse society like Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Afghan media, Afghan audience, encoding and decoding, Entertainment-Education strategy, feminist media studies, reception studies, social change, transnational media

Chapter One

Introduction

When the Taliban successfully captured Kabul in September 1996, they immediately did two things: they barred women from ... any participation in the public sphere, and they banned television. Control over these two elements – women and the media – lay at the heart of the Taliban regime. It is interesting to note that the state of each is increasingly taken as a key index of the democratization and development of a society.

Sreberny, 2002, p. 271

Research on the media and gender, particularly on soap operas, may look and sound repetitive and unattractive. When I decided to conduct this research, many thought it is not *worthy*. The topic was seen as shallow and *unacademic* to some. When I am asked about my Ph.D. research topic, and I answer it relates to gender and media focusing on soap operas, the reaction I often get is, *but why?* Perhaps the idea of *unworthiness* of the topic, particularly unworthy of academic consideration, was my driving force towards this topic. Initially, feminists also faced challenges for studying soap operas, women's magazines, and other, supposedly, women genres (Brunsdon, 1995). Although it is considered an issue of the past, I believe this perception still exists as I am continually being asked why I chose this topic, how it will contribute to society, and how it is significant, particularly in Afghanistan war-torn and post-conflict society.

Studying media, particularly soap operas, is significant and essential, despite the questions, discouragements, and demotivation. In a society like Afghanistan where television is a primary means of entertainment, and foreign-produced soap operas are the popular programs, it is imperative to study how and what is being presented and viewers' reception and interpretation, particularly gender relations representation. Although research in areas such as politics, economy,

development, and public health may sound more important, I believe television and media are as important in today's time.

Furthermore, my own experiences as a regular viewer of soap operas and witnessing my family members such as my mother, aunts, uncles, and cousins being so much invested in transnational soap operas in part motivated me towards this study. It will not be an exaggeration to say that I watched several Indian soap operas on cable TV while growing up. Wanting to be like some of the characters as a teenager and continuously criticizing women and men's portrayal as an adult, I gained interest in studying gender relations' representations on television soap operas and viewers' interpretations of the representations.

Gender representations in media have been a significant research area in feminist media studies for many years. Although the notions of gender, representations, soap opera, and feminist media studies have a long history in Western academics and are emerging in non-Western academia, they are still understudied areas in the Afghanistan context. Despite the limitations, this study attempts to provide insights into representations of gender relations on transnational soap operas on Afghan television stations and aims to pave the path for future feminist media researchers in Afghanistan. Discourses on feminist media need to expand the debates on the media representations of gender, sex, class, abilities, and ethnicity in the context of Afghanistan. This study is an attempt to walk this path.

Drawing on feminist media studies, particularly media representations as a conceptual framework and content analysis as research methodology, I analyze gender relations portrayed in two Turkish soap operas – Paiman and Qesay Maa – on an Afghan television station Tolo TV. Furthermore, I utilize Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model as a theoretical guide and focus group discussions as a data collection method to explore viewers' interpretations and perceptions

of representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas aired on Afghan television stations. Additionally, by applying the Entertainment-Education (EE) strategy, I discuss media's role as an entertainment tool in promoting social change and argue that although achieving social change solely through media is challenging, some steps can act as catalysts in the process. For instance, through integrating EE strategy with an intersectional lens and engaging men in gender equality discussions and advocating for gender equality.

Background Information

The media have become a fundamental part of our social, political, and personal lives. We live in a society where media surround our lives in different forms, such as radio, newspapers, television, and in today's time, the Internet and social media. As Marshall McLuhan argues, media are extensions of humans' physical, social, psychological or intellectual functions (1964). Media are not only tools but also part of our daily performances. Living without media is becoming difficult and almost impossible in today's mediated environment. Croteau and Hoynes (2003) similarly state:

If the media were eliminated, nothing else would be the same. Entertainment would be different. We would not follow sports teams in the newspaper, watch TV, or go to a movie for fun. Our understanding of politics and the world around us would be different because we would not have newspapers, television, magazine, and books to explain what is happening in our communities and beyond. Even our perception of ourselves would probably be different, since we would not have television characters and advertising images to compare ourselves so much with the latest fashions, music, or cars if ads did not imply that we should be concerned with such things. (p. 6)

The media sector in Afghanistan has progressed tremendously in the last nearly two decades. Despite four decades of war and complete shutdown of the media during the Taliban rule that demolished the media sector in Afghanistan, today there are several television stations, radio

stations, publications, and press operating in the country (Osman, 2011, 2019). With the rapid growth of the media sector in Afghanistan, television is replacing the radio, particularly in urban areas (Altai, 2015). Since access to high-speed Internet is costly, and literacy rates are low, television and radio are two dominant media in Afghanistan (Osman, 2019). Additionally, access to television is high among Afghans living in urban settings. According to Fraenkel, Schoemaker, and Himelfarb (2010), 89 percent of urban and 26 percent of rural populations own Television sets.

Television is the medium that is often targeted in the debates around gender (Osman, 2011). The number of private television stations regularly face criticism, bans, and penalties for violating Article three of the Afghan constitution that prohibits publication and broadcasting media content that is “contrary to the sacred religion of Islam” (Osman, 2011, p. 239). Religious leaders and conservative groups in Afghanistan describe television as “addictive like opium” and “uncontrollable like Satan” (Osman, 2011, p. 237).

Additionally, due to Afghanistan’s precarious security situation, people, particularly women, do not prefer and do not have many outdoor entertainment options (Osman, 2011). Therefore, television is likely a leading source of entertainment for the whole household. Considering this, television networks air soap operas and other entertainment programmes in the evening, when the entire family is together (Osman, 2011). Thus, watching television soap operas are among the primary sources of enjoyment and entertainment (Osman, 2011), making them the interest area of research for this study.

Furthermore, Osman (2019) argues Afghan media “exhibits many attributes of democratic media systems” (p. 620). She further states,

While the conditions are not exactly utopic in Afghanistan, the media are able, to a certain degree, to challenge and check the power of state and nonstate actors. Even the most ardent opponents of the Afghan government admit that, compared with neighbouring countries, the

freedoms that the Afghan media have are a cause for hope in building democratic institutions in country. (Osman, 2019, p. 628)

Osman (2019) further argues that Afghan media, with over three dozen television networks, provide more diverse choices of programmes to its viewers “than many developing, or even developed, countries” (p. 624). The media have played a significant role in critiquing government officials and policies (Osman, 2019). For instance, the media played a crucial role in disseminating information and public awareness about the Shiite Marriage Law (Osman, 2019). The Law denied and limited the rights of Afghan Shia¹ women on different matters such as child custody and marital rape.

With the growth and broad reach of media, particularly television, cultural imperialism fears are also instigated, particularly among religious leaders, warlords, and tribal leaders (Osman, 2019). Transnational media content occupies a large part of Afghan television stations (Osman, 2019). It is to note that throughout the dissertation, while discussing transnational media, I am using terms like transnational, foreign, and imported media interchangeably, as used in other scholarly and non-scholarly literature on transnational media.

Foreign-produced soap operas, broadcast by Afghan television networks, are a popular entertainment source for many Afghans. Afghan televisions channels are filled with foreign soap operas from India, China, and Turkey. Indian soap operas such as *Kyun ki saas bhi kabhi bahu thi*, *Kasuti*, and *Kahani ghar ghar ki* were the first imported foreign soap operas broadcast by Tolo TV network². Today Turkish soap operas are among the popular ones. The introduction of transnational soap operas and drama series opened a new chapter in the Afghan media. Turkish television series and soap operas are successful transnational media products that reached different

¹ One of the two main sects of Muslims (Ameli & Molaei, 2012).

² Tolo TV is the first private television network in Afghanistan.

countries (Kuyucu, 2014), including Afghanistan. Religious leaders and other groups opposing foreign media in Afghanistan often worry about transnational media's cultural influence (Osman, 2019) that often results in bans of imported media programmes in Afghanistan (Osman, 2011). However, interested viewers find foreign drama series valuable, particularly in encouraging debates around gender issues in private and public spheres (Osman, 2019).

Transnational soap operas revolve around family issues and events, and gender relations are the core component. Transnational media flow is not merely the exportation of foreign media products but also sharing culture, language, and lifeways. Similarly, transnational soap operas do not only travel across borders as media products but the culture – gender relations as part of the culture – also travel to the host country, and the representations move beyond the boundaries (Üstek & Alyanak, 2017). Being said that, gender has always been a contentious issue throughout the Afghanistan history (Osman, 2011). Women's rights and empowerment agendas by different administrations at different times, Afghan women's representations post 9/11 as passive victims, or women's representations in contemporary local Afghan and transnational media, debates around gender have almost always been a cause of the clash between different groups. With the recent growth in media and particularly television, women's representations in transnational soap operas have attracted even more attention in different ways. Representations of women – Afghan and non-Afghan – have been the main focus of debates among religious groups and others (Osman, 2011). Transnational or foreign soap operas are tremendously popular among audiences, yet they face authorities and religious leaders' opposition. Foreign soap operas are often accused of polluting youth and women's minds and are seen as a source of entertainment for audiences (Osman, 2011, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to explore the content of transnational soap operas and understand what is being represented, often under scrutiny by religious leaders and authorities, mainly, to

understand how transnational soap operas represent gender relations. Also, since the groups opposing foreign soap operas are concerned that they *pollute* audiences, particularly youth and women, it was vital to understand audiences' decoding process and examine whether the assumption is correct or merely an apprehension due to embedded patriarchal thinking.

Grounded in the existing literature on feminist media, media representation, feminist receptions studies, and particularly Afghan media and discussions around the influence of foreign soap operas on Afghan women and youth as well as the content being inappropriate and contradictory to Islam, this dissertation poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How are gender relations portrayed in transnational soap operas on television in Afghanistan?

- (a) What role do the media play in reinforcing and/or challenging gender stereotypes in Afghan society?

RQ2: What role do the media play in shaping Afghan viewers' perceptions of gender relations?

- (a) How do viewers interpret gender relations portrayed on television through transnational soap operas in Afghanistan?

Since one of the study's objectives is to explore the role of media in promoting social change in the context of Afghanistan, the third research question is dedicated to exploring media's role in promoting social change.

RQ3: What role can media play in facilitating social change in Afghanistan?

- (a) How can media challenge traditional gender relations and promote gender equality through entertainment in Afghan society?

Statement of the Problem

As mentioned earlier, in Afghanistan, women's rights have been at the centre of political and societal struggles for more than a hundred years. They have more than once played a vital role in the overthrow of different administrations (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Since 2001, after the fall of

the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, women's rights and gender equality have been one of the priorities for the government of Afghanistan and its international partners assisting in the rehabilitation and reconstruction process of the country, as well as the objective of the United States intervention post 9/11. Additionally, the Afghan 2014 constitution emphasizes on equal rights for women and men and Afghanistan citizens, as Article 22 of the Afghan constitution states. Any discrimination and privilege between the citizens of Afghanistan are prohibited. The citizens of Afghanistan – whether man or woman – have equal rights and duties before the law (Chp. 1, Art. 22). Furthermore, the government of Afghanistan established the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) in 2002 to act as the lead ministry for women's advancement (Kabeer, Khan, & Adlparvar, 2011).

Moreover, gender has been a cross-cutting component of Afghanistan's government and its international partners' development agenda in the process of reconstruction and rehabilitation of the country. Besides, Afghanistan's government developed the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), which is a policy framework for ten years of timeframe. The NAPWA's goal is women empowerment and gender equality. To achieve this goal, NAPWA's mission is to “actively promote institutions and individuals to be responsible for women's empowerment and gender equality by providing clear focus and direction, coordinated action, and shared commitment to the government's vision” (NAPWA, p. 13). Additionally, Afghanistan is one of the United Nation's 193 signatories, ought to strengthen its policies for the betterment of women and children's lives (Pilongo, Echavez, ParvaizTufail, & Mosawi, 2016)

Debates around gender have not spared the broadcast television medium (Osman, 2011). As mentioned earlier, religious groups have targeted many television programmes, both national and transnational, for their culturally *inappropriate* content; however, transnational soap operas are

mainly targeted (Osman, 2011). On the other hand, the foreign television soap operas and drama series are seen as a *low art* form that echoes the Western debates on television and soap opera genre (Osman, 2011). The main argument of critics and oppositions on the portrayals of gender in media moves around women's representations and the notion of polluting Afghan culture with immorality and contradicting Islamic values. The fear is that Afghan women and youth are prone to embracing the *inappropriate* values of foreign content (Osman, 2011). However, there is no focus on stereotypical and sexist representations of gender in the media. Therefore, through this research, I explore how gender relations are represented in transnational television soap operas. Since there is a concern that women and youth are prone to adopting and following transnational media content; However, no research that back the fears. This study explores the decoding process, i.e., audiences' meaning-making and interpretations of transnational soap opera content concerning gender relations. Furthermore, since media are the important social institutions, media representation is crucial in promoting gender equality and challenging gender discrimination. Therefore, this study also explores the role of media in promoting social change.

Significance of the Study

As mentioned earlier, the media play an essential part in the socialization process in our lives. Gender representations in media are seen everywhere. We see gender portrayals on billboards, front pages of magazines, advertisements, and films. Since media is an integral part of people's lives, Behera (2015) argues that people are likely to be influenced by gendered images in media. Our understanding of gender roles and relations are not naturally entrenched but are adopted through cultural activities and practices, and media are a crucial cultural practice (Richardson & Wearing, 2014). Soap operas are often based on love stories and family

relationships, where gender is a visible component. Since soap opera portrays different categories of women and men, gender relations, and power relations, it becomes an important study area.

Looking at the post-Taliban era, compared to other areas of development in Afghanistan, media progress has been incredible (BBC, 2012). The medium of television, after radio, has been playing a dominant role in Afghan people's lives (The Asia Foundation, 2014). In a documentary called *The Network* by Eva Orner, the head of the drama department of Tolo TV mentions that television has a vital role in bringing social change in society. It has been significantly effective in the context of Afghanistan. Similarly, Osman (2014) argues that although Afghan media operate in a hazardous condition and face restraints such as threats, violence, and censorships, they are supported by viewers and are platforms for activism, reform, and "*indigenous modernities*" that can challenge both local conservative groups inside Afghanistan and the international community discourses on Afghanistan (p. 875).

Among different media, television is more effective in influencing culture (Ahmed, 2012; Salzman, 1993, as cited in Johnson, 2001) that has reached our living rooms and our bedrooms. Television has become a part of our families and an irrefragible part of our lives (Silverstone, 1994). In Afghanistan, television has played a critical role in educating and entertaining people (Sherzai, 2015). Especially in a hazardous situation and lack of outdoor entertainment options, particularly for women, television soap operas are likely a vital source of entertainment for the entire household (Osman, 2011).

Despite television's growth as a medium and television soap operas' popularity in Afghanistan, they have not been researched subjects in Afghanistan, particularly their link to gender relations. Studies (e.g., Christine Geraghty, 1991; Dorothy Hobson, 1982; Ien Ang, 1985; Robert Allen, 1985; Sonia Livingstone, 1989; & Tania Modleski, 1979) have focused on soap

operas and Western audiences. It is important to note that considerable scholarly research conducted by Afghan-American media studies scholar Dr. Wazmah Osman (2011, 2014, 2018, 2019, 2020) exists on Afghan media, and my dissertation also builds on Osman's extensive research in this area. Although, Osman explores all facets of the significant role of television in Afghanistan, I have chosen to focus on two transnational Turkish soap operas in my dissertation. Moreover, methodologically, my dissertation focuses on content and audience analyses, whereas Osman's research is based on an in-depth two-year ethnography of the media in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, there is no dearth of literature on women's participation and role in politics, development, peacebuilding, and economy in Afghanistan (e.g., Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2013; Echavez, 2012; Ganesh, 2013; Ganesh et al., 2013; Ibrahim & Mussarat, 2015; Lough et al., 2012). However, the role of the media has often been underestimated in Afghan society. By acknowledging the media's crucial, it is essential to study what is being shown in the media, how media shape audiences' views (if they do), and how media can be leveraged to promote social change, particularly gender equality, in the Afghanistan context.

Despite the tremendous growth of the media sector in Afghanistan, continuous tug of war on gender representations in transnational soap operas and drama series, and acknowledgment of media's role in promoting gender equality, little or no attention has been given to the discourse of using media as a tool to promote gender equality. Thus, this research aims to make an essential contribution by filling this gap in the literature related to media representations and audience studies, particularly feminist media and feminist receptions studies in Afghanistan and pave the way for future studies in these areas.

More significantly, through this study, I aim to stimulate theoretical research on gender, media, and audience studies in Afghanistan and promote Afghan feminist media studies.

Furthermore, the study is not merely focusing on women's representations and interpretations, unlike most early studies, but also on representations of men and masculinity and male participants/viewers' interpretations. Excluding men and masculinity while studying media representations assumes that males' representations are unproblematic (Gallagher, 2014).

Moreover, as someone who grew up watching soap operas and stopped watching them for their representations of women and gender relations, I want to further debates on the Afghan feminist media studies and advance understanding of the social, cultural, and political role media can play in a society like Afghanistan. I hope that this study aids a feminist consciousness of issues regarding gender relations' representations in the media and that this kind of research will support change processes. Furthermore, it is also hoped to increase awareness of sexism, discrimination, privilege, classism, and ableism, both in the media and society.

Focus of the Study: Geography, Medium, and Participants

The focus of the study is transnational media content and Afghan audiences in Afghanistan. The primary purpose of selecting the medium of television is that television ownership is increasing compared to radio sets (Altai, 2010). Television has started to replace radio as the most consumed medium, particularly among the urban population (Akseer et al., 2019). Similarly, the 2014 Afghanistan Media report indicates that television consumption is higher than radio and print media (Altai, 2015). Tolonews (2019) states that according to Afghan government officials, there are 1,879 active media outlets in Afghanistan.

For this study, I am focusing on one of the most popular and leading television channels with higher viewership in Afghanistan, Tolo TV. Tolo owns around 49.8 percent of national audiences (Altai, 2015). It is also important to note that Tolo is known for its quality, innovation, and modernity and is considered a modern and robust television channel for providing

“trustworthy and fast-breaking news” (Altai, 2015, p. 102), offering diversity in programs. Also, Tolo is the first private television channel in Afghanistan, launched in 2004 (Afghanistan Media Guide, 2011). According to BBC (2019), Tolo TV is the most watched television station in Afghanistan.

In Afghan culture, the family is considered one of the most critical institutions (Merrill, Paxson, & Tobey, 2006). Watching television is a favourite family pastime (Altai, 2015); both male and female family members watch television together. Additionally, soap operas are broadcast in the evenings between 7:00 and 9:00 PM (Osman, 2011). Due to uncertain security conditions and lack of leisure venues and activities, particularly for women, people prefer staying home and consuming television; thus, the entire household watches television soap operas together (Osman, 2011). Therefore, the study focuses on both women’s and men’s views to understand their perspectives of gender relations’ representations in transnational soap operas on Afghan media.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into eight chapters. In chapter one, I introduce the dissertation, a brief background, the statement of the problem, the significance of the study, research questions, and a historical overview of Afghanistan, its media, and synopsis of soap operas and transnational media in Afghanistan. Chapter two presents the literature review outlining several theoretical perspectives that include feminist media and television studies, feminist reception studies, and postcolonial feminist media studies that are used to explore representations of gender relations in media and the audience’s decoding of media text. Additionally, chapter three discusses the theoretical framework for the study, and chapter four explains the methodological approach for how the study’s data were collected and analyzed, and ethical considerations throughout the research process. In chapter four, I also briefly discuss my role as the researcher and present my

positionality. The findings are divided into two chapters – five and six. Chapter five highlights the findings arising from the content analysis of the two Turkish soap operas, Paiman and Qesay Maa, and chapter six presents the results of focus group discussions. In chapter seven, I discuss the findings to answer the research questions of the study. As the final chapter, chapter eight of the dissertation, concludes the dissertation by summarizing the main findings, articulating some limitations, and proposing future research areas.

Before moving to the dissertation's conceptual and theoretical discussion, it is essential to provide a historical overview of Afghanistan, its media, and transnational media in the country.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a state, unfortunately, known for its violence, backwardness, and war. However, Afghanistan, as a nation, is more than these negative attributes. Although less known to the world, Afghanistan has always been the center of interest to many world powers. It first came into the headlines of the international media with the Soviet invasion in the 1970s and then when the United States attacked Afghanistan in response to the *war on terror* and search for Osama bin Laden in 2001. Afghanistan's introduction to the world has, almost always, been about war and terror, which unfortunately constructed a partial and one-sided view of the country and its people. However, like any country, Afghanistan has a diverse geography, people, and civilization.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country in the centre and west of the Asia continent, also known as Asia's heart (Barfield, 2010). Its neighbours with Tajikistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan. It is a country of mountains, spread like a blanket of nature. Afghanistan is home to different ethnicities with diverse cultures, which, as Lawless, Constantineau, and Dizboni (2017) state, resulted from foreign invasions throughout history. Each ethnic group has its history and

culture (Emadi, 2005). Although the constitution recognizes Pashto and Dari as the two official languages of Afghanistan, around 49 languages are spoken in the country (Emadi, 2005).

Due to its high strategic value, Afghanistan has always been the interest of world powers, wishing to control human and commercial routes of traffic between the Far East and Western Europe (Lawless et al., 2017). Due to its strategic value, Afghanistan faced many wars and foreign invasions throughout its history (Lawless et al., 2017).

In its present boundary Afghanistan's development began in the nineteenth century, caught up between two powers, the British India and czarist Russia (Barfield, 2010). These powers attempted to control Afghanistan by establishing a central governing power (Lawless et al., 2017), a phenomenon that has always been strange to the Afghan structure. Thus, for achieving this goal, both Britain and Russia at that time focused on creating local political elites who pursued higher education abroad and expected to return and be part of the creation of an educated central government (Lawless et al., 2017). However, the establishment of a central government, run by foreign-educated individuals, likely disconnected the central government from the country's rural part (Lawless et al., 2017). Disconnecting the country's rural population made it impossible to transform the already existing unstable tribal coalition into an efficient, modern, and functional state (Rubin, 1995). Thus, the inability to uniting the rural population with the central government resulted in weakening the country.

The history of Afghanistan is complicated and can fill books and take years to write. However, for this dissertation and to provide a historical overview of the country. The historical literature on Afghanistan coins the twentieth century as the start of the *modernization* process in Afghanistan. It was when rulers focused on progress, development, and state-building and not only on conquering territories. Therefore, I intend to discuss the twentieth century and briefly describe

the events and political changes since then. To make it less complicated, I am breaking down this historical overview into three main periods: 1919-1929, 1929-1978, and 1978-2001.

The period between 1919-1929. Most of the literature marks the start of modernization and development history in Afghanistan back to 1919, after its independence from British colonialism. King Amanullah Khan, who declared Afghanistan an independent state in August 1919, started modernization of Afghanistan's political and social institutions with the declaration of a new constitution in 1923 that conferred equal rights to marginalized ethnic communities (Emadi, 2005). The 1923 Afghan constitution led to the freedom of many Shia Hazaras³, who worked as servants and were looked at as a lower class by many upper and middle-class families (Emadi, 2005). Shias and non-Muslims were allowed to practice their faith freely (Emadi, 2005). King Amanullah Khan's vision was of a modern Afghanistan, from both economic and social perspectives; he was also passionate about women's rights and equality (Emadi, 2005). He planned on constructing roads, establishing modern communication networks, strengthening ties with the international community, and expanding the economy and industry (Emadi, 2005). However, his vision did not fully transform into reality. He was opposed by groups who feared and did not accept the changes he planned and implemented (Emadi, 2005). Besides, Russia's support of Afghanistan's modernization process alarmed Britain on losing its domination; thus, Britain further spurred the opposing groups against Amanullah (Emadi, 2005). Emadi (2005) also argues that Amanullah lacked experience and political maturity, which led his plans to fail since he could not effectively deal with sensitive social, political, and religious oppositions.

Musahiban Brothers to Soviet Union invasion (1929- 1978). Afghanistan was the power battle for international powers and a battlefield of power for domestic power groups. After

³ An ethnic group in Afghanistan, native to the region of Hazarajat in central Afghanistan. The majority of Hazaras practice Shia Islam.

Amanullah Khan, many groups in Afghanistan fought for power, gained power, and lost power; however, the period of *Musahiban* brothers and their sons that started with the declaration of Nadir Khan as the king in 1929 was “the longest interval of peace and internal stability” (Barfield, 2010, p. 169). Afghanistan was politically stable during this period and avoided any international conflict and internal uprising (Barfield, 2010).

After Nadir Khan’s assassination in 1933, his son Zahir was declared the king, but since he was young and unable to administer state affairs, his uncles and Nadir’s brothers, Shah Mahmood, ruled in his name (Emadi, 2005). During this time, some changes were introduced by the then Afghan state. For example, in 1946, during the rule of King Zahir, his uncle Shah Mahmood was appointed as the Prime Minister (Emadi, 2005). Shah Mahmood tried to change the image of monarchy that was viewed as brutal and unkind by introducing some reforms such as “amnesty to political prisoners, free parliamentary elections, freedom of association, and freedom of media” (Emadi, 2005, p. 36). These reforms resulted in formations of new political groups, several independent newspapers, the election of radical and patriotic individuals in the 1949 parliamentary election, and formation of a student union by Kabul university students in 1950 (Emadi, 2005). Similar to Amanullah Khan’s period, resistance to establishments and liberal approaches arose. As resistance increased, Shah Mahmood was forced to resign as he was perceived unable to deal with the struggles, and thus, King Zahir’s cousin, Daoud Khan, was appointed as the Prime Minister in 1953 (Barfield, 2010; Emadi, 2005). The modernization process during Daoud’s tenure period between 1953-1963 was top-down and instrumented by the state, which Emadi (2005) terms as a “state-sponsored modernization” (p. 36). During this time, Daoud asked the United States for the military aide to counterpoise United States’ growing military support to Pakistan (Emadi, 2005). Unfortunately, the United States refused to assist, and Daoud, to receive support, ought to

strengthen ties with the Soviet Union (Emadi, 2005). Since the Soviet Union was always interested in Afghanistan as a route to influence events in the Indian subcontinent (Emadi, 2005), it sent Afghanistan a tremendous amount of financial aid for infrastructures, education, and military training. Subsequently, Daoud's increased influence overshadowed King Zahir, which resulted in his forced resignation (Emadi, 2005). Thus, king Zahir took power and emerged as the king and ruler of Afghanistan (Barfield, 2010).

King Zahir, in 1964 appointed a committee to draft a new constitution approved by the *Loya Jirga* – a committee composed of tribal elders and influencers, mostly men from around the country (Emadi, 2005). The 1964 constitution recognized the freedom of speech, assembly, and associations (Emadi, 2005). During this period, several political parties and organizations established that advocated for liberalism, nationalism, Islam, and socialism (Emadi, 2005). Some of these parties and organizations also found their way to the parliament in the 1964 parliamentary elections. During the 1960s, as Barfield (2010) states, “the economic and social development of Afghanistan accelerated at the fastest pace that the country had ever known as it opened itself more to the outside world and ended the severe isolation” (p. 170).

In 1973, Daoud, the former Prime Minister, staged a coup in the absence of King Zahir and seized power declaring Afghanistan a republic (Emadi, 2005). The pro-soviet groups supported Daoud; however, revolutionaries did not support him and were doubtful of his intentions in bringing changes that will benefit the public (Emadi, 2005). Although pro-soviet groups supported Daoud, he eventually changed his tone towards them and dismissed pro-soviet forces from his government (Emadi, 2005). To maintain their influence, the Soviet Union supported the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a pro-soviet party established in 1965 (Emadi, 2005).

From PDPA coup to United States invasion in Afghanistan (1978-2001). PDPA eventually seized power in another coup in 1978 by assassinating Daoud and declaring Afghanistan a democratic republic (Barfield, 2010; Emadi, 2005). To destroy all state rivals and achieve absolute social and political control, as Maley (1987) asserts, PDPA slaughtered approximately 100,000 people, including village elders, religious leaders, and almost all intermediaries between the state and society. As a consequence, a new insurgent group emerged that claimed to be fundamentalist Islamist youth, later called Mujahideen (Lawless et al., 2017). Mujahideen saw the PDPA administration as an atheist communist regime and aimed to fight and defeat them (Lawless et al., 2017). Mujahideen were also supported by outside powers such as the United States, CIA, and Pakistan (Lawless et al., 2017). Unlike tribal communities who lived by ruling through communal ties, elders respect, and deference offered to the religious teachers, these newly emerged armed groups ruled by fear (Lawless et al., 2017).

On the one hand, PDPA was facing opposition from the Islamist youth groups and on the other hand, it was internally divided into two factions, the *Khalq* and *Parcham*. Initially, the *Khalq* division led the party, headed by Taraki, who led the country after PDPA seizing power in 1978 (Emadi, 2005). With increased divisions among the faction's members, the party weakened, which concerned the Soviet Union. To reduce the country's ongoing tensions, the Soviet Union supported Babrak Karmal, a member of the *Parcham* division, and installed him as the state's leader (Emadi, 2005). Karmal still faced opposition from Islamic groups, the revolutionaries, and others (Emadi, 2005). Because Karmal was the head of the state, supposedly, installed by a foreign power, i.e., the Soviet Union, he could not gain a lot of public support (Emadi, 2005). Furthermore, he could not reduce the ongoing tensions and divisions in the party and with other groups, which resulted in his

dismissal from his post and a new head of state, Najibullah, was, as argued by Emadi (2005), supported by the Soviet Union.

Najibullah, who was the director of the state intelligence, became the president of Afghanistan. To gain public support, Najibullah renamed the PDPA party to *Hizb-e-Watan* (translated as homeland party) (Emadi, 2005). Divisions and tensions inside the party from *Khalq* and Karmal's supporters from the *Parcham* division and outside the party from the Islamic groups, supported by the United States, also continued during Najibullah's tenure (Emadi, 2005). In 1989, the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan considering that Najibullah will maintain control of the state, but the armed conflict continued (Emadi, 2005). Following the defeat of the PDPA and the Soviet forces' withdrawal after ten years of invasion, Afghanistan once again saw division among different armed groups arose (Lawless et al., 2017). According to Emadi (2005), Najibullah had no option but to support the peace efforts suggested by the United Nations. With the United Nations' facilitation, Najibullah agreed to transfer the power to a coalition of Islamic parties and migrate to India (Emadi, 2005). Najibullah was on his way to board the plane to India when his opponents prevented him from leaving the country and suggested he seek refuge in the United Nations compound in Kabul (Emadi, 2005). Najibullah remained in the United Nations compound until the Taliban assassinated him in 1996.

When Najibullah handed in the power to Islamic groups (Mujahideen) in 1992, Sibghatullah Mojadidi from *Jabha-e-mili-e-nijat-e-Afghanistan* (the national front of Afghanistan) became the head of the state (Emadi, 2005). Mojadidi's turn ended shortly in June 1992, and Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of *Jamiat-e-Islami-e-Afghanistan* (Islamic Society of Afghanistan), became the president (Emadi, 2005). Rabbani's turn ended in October 1992, but he went for the second round, which fuelled the anger among other groups and resulted in armed conflict (Emadi, 2005). With

the eruption of civil war, Afghanistan became a failed state ignored and forgotten by the world (Barfield, 2010). Also, internally, this political and social crisis gave birth to yet another group, the Taliban, in 1994 (Barfield, 2010; Lawless et al., 2017) supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Emadi, 2005). Taliban soon took over the Eastern and Western provinces and the capital region, Kabul. According to Lawless et al. (2017), the reasons behind the Taliban's rapid success was the widespread support and military power. People initially supported the Taliban because they were tired of the war and rule of fear by Mujahideen (Lawless et al., 2017) and saw the Taliban as a ray of hope that will abolish the regime of fear. Taliban announced their goals to be stability, security, and religious purity. Although, Taliban had public support initially, this support decreased and faded because of their strict inhumane rules, which they interpreted as Islamic law, forcefully imposed on people (Lawless et al., 2017).

Afghanistan remained under the Taliban control until 2001, when ousted by the United States interventions. In October 2001, the United States military operations commenced in Afghanistan to fight against the Taliban and Al Qaida, whom the United States considered responsible for the 9/11 attacks. During the same time, the United States organized the Bonn conference in Germany. Several Islamic groups, who once fought for power, agreed to join the United States fight against the Taliban and Al Qaida (Emadi, 2005). Along with Islamic groups, the monarchist circle around King Zahir and others in exile also participated in the Bonn conference (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). The Bonn conference announced Hamid Karzai as the president of Afghanistan (Emadi, 2005). Karzai led the state from 20 December 2001 until September 2014.

Despite the Afghan government's the continuous conflict and instability, different leaders at different times have introduced administrative, social, and political reforms, changes, and

developments. In the 1930s, Afghanistan built the Spinzar Cotton Company, which became the world's largest cotton provider (Barfield, 2010). In 1964, with the Soviet Union's support, Afghanistan built the world's largest tunnel pass, the Salang tunnel (Barfield, 2010). According to Barfield (2010), "the downfall of the economic development of the 1940s and 1950s was subsistence-based economy; and in the 1960s Afghanistan's economy was very much foreign aid dependent" (p. 205).

In the mid-seventies, Afghanistan was a place of attention for World Travellers. One of the reasons for this attention was the Afghan hashish that was inexpensive and easily accessed (Edwards, 2002). Most of the World Travellers' center of activity was Shahr-e-Naw and Chicken Street in the center of Kabul city – the areas I grew up and went to school.

Despite the political ups and downs, the Afghan state attempted to move forward. Still, ideological differences, power battles, and foreign interventions never allowed the dreams seen by many Afghans of a prosperous Afghanistan to come true.

Afghan Women: Movements, Activism, Progress and Downfall

Religion, customs, and tribal laws shape the traditional way of life in Afghanistan (Knabe, 1974), and the family structure is mainly based on the patriarchal system (Emadi, 2005). The understandings of masculinity and femininity are passed down from generations (Pilongo et al., 2016). Community and communal identity are principal among Afghans, both in urban and rural settings and women see themselves as a vital part of the family unit (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Women are highly respected within family and community, and traditionally, they are the peacemakers among communities (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Besides, Afghan women's contribution to the economy through cooperation with men in agriculture cannot be denied (Rostami-Povey, 2007).

The institution of the family determines one's honour, social status, and personal code of conduct. Since sons are considered to take forward the family's name, heritage, and property, they are valued and preferred more than girls (Emadi, 2005). Although the attitude towards girl is changing among Afghan families and communities, some families still like having sons over daughters. A woman who bears a boy child feels her status is more secure in her husbands' family. Since girls are married off and leave their parents' home to join their husband's families, they are considered to belong to someone else, as an Afghan proverb says *Dukhtar Mal Mardom ast* – translates as *girls belong to others*. Challenges that Afghan women and men face are often due to harmful traditional practices that marginalize women (Pilongo et al., 2016).

Gender, among Afghan women, is discussed in the context of social relations, religion, culture, domination, subordination, and masculinity (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Gender relations in Afghanistan are not fixed; they change as social, economic, political, and family power relations change (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Gender, for Afghan women, as Rostami-Povey (2007) states, is “a process embedded in all social relations and institutions. It is a relationship that is constituted through their lived experiences within continually redefined and contested social activities and institutions” (p. 4). A Western definition of conventional gender divisions ignores the fluidities of Afghan women's identities (Rostami-Povey, 2007). In Afghanistan, as argues Ahmed-Ghost (2003), women “are not an isolated institution; their fate is entwined with and determined by historical, political, social, economic and religious forces” (p. 2).

In Afghan society, women's position is shaped by many factors such as culture, religion, ethnicity, and tribal rules. Additionally, patriarchal relations also likely vary across the country by class, ethnicity, and location (Kabeer, Khan, & Adlparvar, 2011). Rostami-Povey (2007) argues that ethnic groups are vital in understanding gender in Afghanistan. Gender discrimination has

strong cultural and historical roots in Afghan society (Kaur & Ayubi, 2009). Multi-ethnic structure, a traditional society governed along tribal lines, weak central state, long history of war and violence following an unstable political and economic situation all have impacted women's position in the Afghan society (Kaur & Ayubi, 2009).

The Pashtun ethnicity has its code of ethics called *Pashtunwali*. According to *Pashtunwali*, men are always responsible for women's protection; however, this does not signify that women stay passive (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Women in Afghan families are men's honour (*Namoos*), and feuds over *Namoos* are more perilous than disputes over land or water (Knabe, 1974). The notion of men being protectors of women and women being men's honour is problematic. As Knabe (1974) states, "the prevailing attitude is one typically associated with classic patriarchal societies" (p. 144). Men in Afghan society's patriarchal system are expected to carry out the "major responsibilities in their families and communities" (Echavez, Mosawi, & Pilongo, 2016).

Society and culture in Afghanistan support gender segregation in public (Emadi, 2005); for example, in the bus or other public transportations, doctor's waiting areas, and schools are segregated for women and men. Women are culturally required to cover their heads when appearing in public. In Kabul and large cities, women mostly wear headscarves, and in the rural parts, women wear burqas or big chadors that cover from head to toe. There is a mixed public attitude towards women's education. Some families consider education for girls essential and support them in pursuing it. Some families are indifferent about girls' education since, according to them, women belong to the domestic realm. Even if they do not pursue education, it does not make much of a difference. Some families are against girls' education, while some families who support girls' education cannot send their girls to school due to security challenges.

Despite high respect for women and their contribution to the economy, patriarchal values such as women being men, family, and tribe's honour, settling disputes, and rebate debts in exchange of girls and women, marrying girls in exchange for cash or kind remain inherent among many ethnic groups and Afghan tribal culture (Rostami-Povey, 2007). As Emadi (2005) argues, the social formation of tribal setting is majorly based on gender inequality where women are seen as second-class citizens. Such an attitude can be seen among some urban populations as well. Women enjoy less privilege and security compared to their male counterparts (Hassanzadeh, 2018).

Afghan women have equal rights by the constitution, and Islam teaches equality between women and men; however, patriarchal society constrains women from fully practicing their rights. Tribal laws and culture usually take primacy over Islamic and constitutional laws in deciding gender roles (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Tribal power plays, institutions of honour, and inter-tribal system threaten women's position (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Women have no or limited power to defend themselves from violence and abuse (Emadi, 2002). Regardless of women's legislative protections, cases of women's rights violations are rarely investigated by police and courts (Gereš et al., 2018). As Hassanzadeh (2018) states, "in the traditional and patriarchal society of Afghanistan, being born as a woman can mean a lack of access to many social opportunities and many barriers to success through life" (p. 2).

Moreover, in a rural and tribal context, if a woman is suspected of moral misconduct, she can face severe punishment or even killed (Knabe, 1974). Gender division of labour is very prominent in Afghan society; childcare, cooking, and housework are mainly women's jobs (Knabe, 1977). Sex stereotypes, similar to the West, such as strength, aggression, and power, are associated with men, while weakness, passiveness, and kindness are associated with women (Knabe, 1977).

Although patriarchal structures are dominant in Afghan society, women's struggle against patriarchal powers throughout history rejects the essentialism about Afghan women (Rostami-Povey, 2007).

Reforms in the field of women's advancement. For more than a century, various Afghanistan leaders strived to introduce laws and reforms to improve women's lives socially, economically, and culturally and structure an Afghan society where women can freely practice their rights (Emadi, 2005; Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). However, changes and reforms introduced for women's rights almost always triggered resistance and serious political and social reactions (Emadi, 2005; Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). As Ahmed-Ghosh (2003) states, "Afghanistan may be the only country in the world where during the last century kings and politicians have been made and undone by struggles relating to women's status" (p. 1).

The advancement of women's rights in Afghanistan can be traced back to Amir Abdul Rahman Khan's ruling period (1880-1901). Abdul Rahman Khan, belonging to Pashtun ethnicity, changed customary laws that restricted women's status (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). For instance, he ended the practice of forcing a widow to marry her deceased husband's relative, often the husband's brother (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). Similarly, in the early 20th century, King Amanullah Khan introduced some reforms to promote women's rights by establishing girls' schools, sending girls abroad for education, and declaring veil not a requirement for women (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). King Amanullah's state established girls' school, the first hospital for women *Masturat*, theatre for women, and established weekly publication *Ershad-e-Niswan* (the Guide for women) (Emadi, 2005). King Amanullah was keen to discourage polygamy, "restrict marriage payments, ban child marriage, and end the custom of exchanging women for settling blood feuds" (Barfield, 2010, p. 185). *Nizam Namah-e-Arosi*, Nikah, and male

circumcision was introduced in 1924 that prescribed minimum age for marriage, encouraged girls to freely choose their partner, and take legal action if they face mistreatment by their spouse (Emadi, 2005). In 1928, during King Amanullah's rule, the Association for the Protection of Women (*Anjoman-e-Himayat_e_Niswan*) was founded to support and defend women's rights (Emadi, 2005).

Queen Soraya, King Amanullah's wife, was a prominent political face for championing women's independence and liberation in Afghanistan (Runion, 2017). Her efforts for women's rights resulted in Afghan women's achievements, such as their inclusion in politics (Runion, 2017). She was a strong supporter of women's rights in Afghanistan, for which she is often seen as "the first and one of the most powerful Afghan women activists" (Runion, 2017, p. 120). As mentioned earlier, Amanullah Khan's reforms were seen as too extreme and radical, which also provoked anger among tribal and religious leaders in the country that ultimately led to his overthrow (Runion, 2017; Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). The reforms to change marriage customs and women's treatment were the most controversial that inflamed anger (Barfield, 2010).

King Zahir and Prime Minister Daoud Khan, who were active advocates of women's rights, also supported women's social advancement (Runion, 2017). Daoud also declared wearing a veil in public a choice by women and not a requirement (Runion, 2017). Furthermore, King Zahir's 1964 constitution of expanded the women's movement by ensuring freedom of speech and press forming of associations (Emadi, 2005). Freedom of speech, press, and the formation of associations paved the way for women's movement and increased their participation in political parties (Runion, 2017). By the beginning of the 1960s, educated women were seen holding prominent positions in the Afghan government; few were elected as parliament members and appointed as cabinet ministers (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). The number of female students at

universities and higher education institutes grew, and the coeducation system allowed women to learn side by side with their male counterparts (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007).

King Zahir's wife, Queen Humaira, similar to Queen Soraya, was an active women's rights promoter. Queen Humaira established the first women's organization called Women's Society in 1946 that represented Afghan women on different matters (Knabe, 1974). The organization was centred in Kabul with branches in other provincial towns (Emadi, 2002). Although Women's Society was a government entity, it often criticized the government for its slow progress on women's matters and challenged patriarchal practices and customs subjected to women (Knabe, 1974). In 1972, the Women's Society initiated the Afghan Women's Volunteer Organization, and its members were the women from the elite class (Runion, 2017). In 1968, the Afghan Family Guidance Association was established, which by 1973 opened six clinics in Kabul and served in 13 provinces (Knabe, 1974). Politics, a male-dominant area, was now witnessing women's increased participation. For example, in rural areas, tribal chiefs or Arbabs have always been men who act as the sole mediator of social disputes and conflicts and spokesperson of their community; however, women were coming forward for these positions during this time. For instance, in the 1950s in the Tagwa village of Bamyan province, Agha Nag was elected as a female Arbab in the community (Emadi, 2005). Similarly, Mah-e-Alam, an Ismaili woman, represented her district in Badakhshan province, and Kadija was another female Arbab in Bamyan province (Emadi, 2005).

Furthermore, PDPA, since its establishment, advocated for women's rights and equality (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). Anahita Ratibzadah, a PDPA female member, would meet with women to discuss their rights and obligations (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). In 1979, the PDPA administration issued decrees banning both child marriage and forced marriages but faced opposition by tribal chiefs and thus, the government could not fully administer them (Wahab &

Youngerman, 2007). Moreover, as Moghadam (2014) states, the state during the PDPA administration embarked on an aggressive literacy campaign led by the Afghan Women Democratic Organization to educate women. Since any approach for women's advancement was opposed in tribal settings, the PDPA pressurized villagers even physically forced them to participate in literacy classes (Emadi, 2002; Moghadam, 2014). Although PDPA announced and introduced decrees and laws concerning women's rights that none of the former administrations did, its execution was repressive and autocratic (Emadi, 2002). Since all of these attempts to women's advancement were top-down, there was less to no public participation and consultation, mainly the rural engagement that could have supported the implementation of reforms, considering the domination of the tribal system in Afghanistan's rural settings. According to Rostami-Povey (2007), the reason for the failure of efforts for women's advancement was not solely the clash between modernity and traditionalism, but the gap that was formed and widened between the urban elite and rural population.

Despite the attention to women's rights and the implementation of reforms and changes better women's status in Afghanistan, the process kept failing. It can be argued that the approaches are taken to advance women in Afghanistan post-independence and through Daoud Khan and PDPA administrations were not conventional. Implementation of reforms was top-down, introduced and implemented by the state. The pioneers of women's rights were almost all from elite and privileged families, and the changes hardly reached rural parts of the country. There was a lack of rural women's participation in the movements. Since tribal practices governed villages and the central government could not compete, most of the development programs for women focused on larger cities (Moghadam, 2014). According to Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016-2017 (2018) data, the rural population composes 72.1 percent of the country's population

today, which was higher during the 1930s to 1980s, had less to no involvement in the reforms introduced. As one can argue, rural women had limited to no knowledge of the movements happening in Kabul and large cities. However, I believe it was practical for elite women to initiate the movement, utilizing their privileges, resources, and access which other women did not have. It is also important to emphasize that the top-down development approach in women's movements is not unique to the Afghanistan context. Historically, both in the Global North and Global South, the movements and developments have been elite and urban, which gradually reached other segments of society and became more intersectional and inclusive.

Women's movement in Afghanistan. One can trace Afghan women's participation in liberation movements to the 1880s. Afghans have grown up hearing and reading a very famous story of a young Afghan girl Malalai during the Maiwand battle – the second Anglo-Afghanistan war – in schoolbooks. To boost soldiers' morale during the Maiwand battle in Kandahar province, Malalai, a young girl, took the Afghan flag and recited the poem:

I shall make a beauty spot of my beloved's blood, which will put shame to the roses in my garden.

Young love, if you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand,

By God, someone is saving you for a token of shame (Emadi, 2002, p. 114).

Malalai's story indicates that Afghan women's involvement in liberation and freedom movements have been vital throughout Afghan history.

With the implementation of reforms since the 1930s, women gained access to education, introduced to Western films and other media, travelled abroad, and interacted with the world outside. Changes introduced by governments, raised consciousness among a small group of Afghan women in some major cities particularly in Kabul who supported women's progress (Knabe, 1974). While the gain was happening at a slow pace for these women, the conservative

groups saw the progress as dangerous and happening very fast (Knabe, 1974). Conservative groups feared that these *modern women*, although composed a small percentage of the urban population, were neglecting their culture and religion, and therefore, were hated, criticized, and abused (Knabe, 1974).

Although the women's struggles against social injustice and inequality started in the early 1950s in Afghanistan, organized women's movements began after promulgating the 1964 constitution (Emadi, 2002) that allowed the formation of associations. Women's organizations were divided into two groups, liberals and leftists (Emadi, 2002). The liberals, most of whom came from the upper-middle class, initiated many institutions and associations such as Women's Society, Afghan Women Welfare Organization, and the Family Guidance Center (Emadi, 2002). They also established performance theatres for women, first publication, the concept of fashion, fashion shows and pageants, and introduced health policies for women – use of contraception and abortion (Emadi, 2002). Liberals can be called the pioneers of women's rights movements in Afghanistan as their efforts and achievements paved the way for the women's rights movement in Afghanistan.

The second group were leftists, who claimed that gender equality could be achieved through a revolutionary transformation of the socio-economic system and its ideology and politics (Emadi, 2002). Leftists were then divided into two groups based on their political ideology: pro-soviet Women's Democratic Organization of Afghanistan (WDOA) led by Anahita Ratibzada, and Progressive Youth Organization (PYO) (Emadi, 2005). WDOA supported a socialist society based on Soviet socialism (Emadi, 2002; 2005). It also supported the Soviet invasion in 1979, while PYO, on the contrary, argued that peaceful transformation of socialism is not possible and thus stressed revolutionary armed uprising as means of ending class oppression and building a socialist

society (Emadi, 2002; 2005). Unlike WDOA, PYO strongly condemned Russian occupation and participated in the struggles to *free* Afghanistan (Emadi, 2005).

Every year, both WDOA and PYO organized rallies and meetings on March 8, International Women's day (Emadi, 2002; 2005). on July 22, 1968, they organized one of the significant rallies in response to the conservative group's proposal submitted to the parliament to ban women travelling abroad for education (Emadi, 2002; 2005). During these rallies and demonstrations, women were attacked by acid and were assaulted by those opposing their movement (Emadi, 2002; 2005), but despite the opposition, torture, and humiliation, Afghan women continued their equality struggles.

Afghan women did not only resist the conservative Islamic groups who opposed women's rights and liberation; they also resisted the regressive strategies of women's modernization by PDPA. During the PDPA administration, women used traditional female activities such as sewing and tea parties to gather and discuss their plan and share information on the whereabouts of their loved ones who were imprisoned or taken away by the PDPA (Khalq division) administration (Emadi, 2002). It is worth mentioning that women in Afghanistan did not only organize rallies and protests; some women also participated in activities such as abduction and assassination of government and Soviet supporters (Emadi, 2002).

Women of other political ideologies – nationalists, Islamists, and revolutionaries – that opposed the Soviet invasion also continued their resistance after the Soviet invasion (Emadi, 2002). Revolutionary Afghan Women Association (RAWA), established in 1977 and led by Meena, was one of such organizations whose objective was to unify women and girls around the country in support of the war for national liberation (Emadi, 2002). RAWA demanded the formation of the Islamic Republic in Afghanistan and the Soviet Union's withdrawal from

Afghanistan (Emadi, 2002). RAWA carried on its activities challenging the Soviet invasion and regressive policies of the state. Many RAWA and other organizations' members were arrested, imprisoned, and tortured by the government (Emadi, 2005). Many activists fled the country and took refuge in neighbouring countries like Pakistan, Iran, India, and some in the western states. RAWA, in exile, too, continued its activities (Emadi, 2005). Although RAWA supported an Islamic republic, it challenged Islamic groups' conservative policies and practices towards women in Afghanistan. Their opposition to the Islamic groups and their policies led to Meena's assassination in Pakistan (Emadi, 2005).

Afghan women actively participated in women's rights and national liberation movements throughout history. They faced all kinds of torture, beating, and risks to their lives and, at times, risked their families but continued their battles against oppression, regression, and discrimination without any benefit of aid and assistance from the international community (Emadi, 2002). Afghan women's struggle continued against the violent regime of Mujahideen and the Taliban. Despite the tragedies, Afghan women have always known how to struggle for their rights (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Afghan women have struggled against gender prejudices from Islamic tradition to Orientalist representations (Rostami-Povey, 2007).

Downfall of women's rights. Despite opposition from tribal and religious groups, different administrations did implement some reforms. Although the changes and reforms affected a small population of urban women, we cannot overlook Afghan women's rights movements, achievements, and struggles. However, a time came when women, who fought for their rights for years, saw their achievements sinking.

The Taliban period is often displayed as the start of women's oppression in Afghanistan in the Western media. However, the downfall of women's rights and their movements started with

the Mujahideen coming into power in 1992 and the start of civil war in Afghanistan that led to the devastation of the country and its systems, 1.5 million Afghans death, and seven million displaced (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Afghans suffered most human rights abuses during Mujahideen (1992-1994). The country was divided into territories among Islamic groups, and warlords fighting to capture regions obtained greater power for themselves (Yaseen, 2015). Warlords established their governments in the areas under their control (Amnesty International, 2001). According to the Amnesty International report, armed forces, during Mujahideen, killed, detained, tortured, and raped unarmed civilians based on suspicion of supporting rival groups or other ethnic groups (2001). The 1990s civil war resulted in the killing and wounding of hundreds of thousands of women and children by artillery attacks by different political factions of Islamic groups, fighting for power, aimed knowingly at residential areas (Amnesty International, 1995). Women during the Mujahideen civil war period were slaughtered in their homes, beaten, abducted, raped, and taken as wives by force by commanders or sold into prostitution (Amnesty International, 1995; Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). There were incidents of young girls attempting suicide to avoid being raped and abducted. The Afghan constitution suspended during the civil war period (Yaseen, 2015). The laws became meaningless, the judiciary system was destroyed, and the country was divided among groups (Yaseen, 2015). Mujahideen civil war was the period when Afghan women entirely lost their fundamental civil rights. They were prohibited from employment, right to association, and expression (Amnesty International, 1995). Women were forced to wearing a veil and were not allowed to leave their homes (Amnesty International, 1995). 1992-1996 period, one can argue, was the most brutal period by Mujahideen that Afghanistan had never seen before.

During 1994 Taliban emerged and took control of large parts of the country; in 1996, they captured Kabul city, the capital, and by 2001 the Taliban gained control of over 90 percent of the

country (Amnesty International, 2001). A Rostami-Povey (2007) states, the Taliban were the young Mujahideen who disagreed with their older leaders' brutality. The United States and Saudi Arabia, who once supported Mujahideen to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, were now witnessing the Taliban's emergence. Taliban violated serious international humanitarian laws – attacks on civilians, indiscriminate bombing, the killing of civilians, and the prisoners' execution (Amnesty International, 2001). Women lost whatever rights they still retained (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007) and became the main focus of the Taliban's Islamization program (Yaseen, 2015). Taliban issued decrees on women and their way of living and justified them as Islamic since, according to them, Islam has specific instructions for women (Yaseen, 2015). By their belief, the decrees instructed that women are administrators of their families. They should cover themselves when they leave home and don't behave in manners to attract men's attention and; men are responsible for providing women's living necessities (Yaseen, 2015). Women, during the Taliban period, were not allowed to work which affected women who had lost their male family members in the war (Yaseen, 2015). Storekeepers were not permitted to sell to women customers and were punished if they did so (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). I remember one day I was accompanying my mother to visit a doctor. We had to hire a taxi, and taxi drivers were afraid of giving us a ride as because we were alone, without a male companion. Taxi drivers could be punished for providing a lift to strange women in their taxis. The taxi driver we hired told us if a Talib stopped and interrogated us, we needed to say we are related to the driver. No doubt, life was devastating during the Taliban regime.

Taliban further banned girls from going to school or universities; they were not allowed to see male doctors, and since women were not allowed to work, access to female doctors was a challenge (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Yaseen, 2015). Since women were the backbone of the education

system and a key factor of health care, their absence weakened these services (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007).

Taliban established *Al-amr-bil-maruf wa-al-hani-an-al-munkir* (the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice) (Rostami-Povey, 2007) to punish those who violated their rules and regulations. It performed as religious police. The common punishments included lashing on the streets and public humiliation of women and men (Yaseen, 2015). They restricted some fundamental human acts such as walking or laughing for women. Women were not allowed to *walk loud* or laugh in public; they could not wear heels, makeup, or bright colors (Yaseen, 2015).

Taliban restricted policies profoundly affected women and children, their financial conditions, social status, health, and nutrition. Rostami-Povey (2007) argues that violence against women, women's low status, and power imbalances between men and women generated by Taliban's patriarchal policies eventually became norms. Although patriarchal values did exist in Afghan society, the Taliban period further strengthened and deeply implanted them into society's core. Nevertheless, despite the restrictions, humiliations, and punishments, Afghan women did not stop their efforts against conservative policies during the Taliban. Women formed their survival strategies by unifying with other women and developing their social capital, which became a means of empowerment (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Women continued helping each other. For instance, organizations such as the Women's Association for Afghanistan, a women-led group, was secretly active during the Taliban and provided income-generating skills training (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Educated women taught young girls at homes running their secret community schools. They let their peers know about secret schools in their neighbourhoods providing young girls with the opportunity to pursue education. Women and girls used their burqas to hide books and school materials to go to secret schools to study and teach while risking their lives every day

(Rostami-Povey, 2007). Pursuing education, a fundamental human right, has been a challenge for Afghan women due to civil war and unjustifiable patriarchal values; therefore, education has always been the heart of Afghan women's struggles (Rostami-Povey, 2007).

Afghan women post-Taliban. Many celebrated the Taliban's overthrow by the United States military intervention in November 2001, inside Afghanistan and diasporic communities. However, it should not be ignored that the United States military operations also damaged and killed many civilians in Afghanistan. It is reported that the United States bombing killed approximately 4000 civilians, animals, destroyed houses, and displaced people (Rostami-Povey, 2007). The exit of the Taliban also brought the fear of reverting to Afghanistan of 1992, the Mujahideen period, since the United States sought Mujahideen's support to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan post-September 11 attacks on the United States.

The aftermaths of the brutal period of the Taliban were bitter. They left a harsh legacy to social life – interethnic mistrust, destruction of the educational system, eliminating women from the socio-economic arena, and establishing an opium economy (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). However, the new government took several steps toward protecting women's rights (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). The Bonn conference did have some significant provisions on women's rights and political participation (Nemat, 2011). The Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission were established as government bodies to deal with imbalances in women's rights and their position in the society caused by violations of their rights during the years of war (Nemat, 2011). The international community and the Afghan government set some impressive goals to improve women's status in Afghanistan (Sakeeneh, 2001).

Women were part of the constitutional Loya Jirga of 2003 (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). Article 22 of the 2004 constitution of Afghanistan prohibits any discrimination and privilege

between the citizens of Afghanistan. Furthermore, Articles 43 and 44 guarantee women's right to education, and article 48 their right to work (Khan, 2012). The constitution also sets a 25-seat quota for women in parliament (Wahab, & Youngerman, 2007). With the reforms mentioned above, the government appointed women in higher positions such as cabinet members, parliament members, governors, and ambassadors in the post-Taliban government. Women once again appeared in the media as anchors, singers, and performers. Women's secretly active organizations during the Taliban were now officially recognized organizations (Nemat, 2011). To connect to the rural population, the Afghan government established the National Solidarity Program (NSP), a community development program, allowing communities to design, plan, and implement their development projects (National Solidarity Program website). NSP necessitates women's participation throughout the process. The Afghan media have developed considerably and helped highlight women's rights issues (Nemat, 2011).

The ouster of the Taliban and changes in the policies and legislations undoubtedly opened opportunities for women in Afghanistan (Nemat, 2011). The United States claimed the objective to intervene in Afghanistan was to fight terrorism and liberate Afghan women; such claims increased expectations. With the fall of the Taliban and tremendous support from the international community and especially the USA, changes in women's status in Afghanistan were visible. However, one can ask whether these changes were due to the absence of the Taliban or as a result of the efforts of the international community and established government in Afghanistan?

Although establishments of the Ministry of Women's affairs, Afghanistan Humans Rights Commission, the involvement of international organizations, and NGOs working for women's rights and empowerment did bring about changes, less attention is paid to women's well-being-livelihoods, poverty, insecurity (Rostami-Povey, 2007). The United States' focus was to *unveil*

Afghan women as, according to western perspective, veil or burqa is the primary source of *third world women's* oppression. Thus, by *unveiling*, Afghan women are liberated. However, for a country with a long history of conflict and war, causing poverty and an unstable economy, the burqa becomes less of a problem for people. As Rostami-Povey (2007) argues,

The reality is that the United States led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was not about peace, security and development of women's liberation and democracy. The western hegemonic alliance rationalized a system of governance in Afghanistan to facilitate the West's desire to control Central Asia in the face of the potential danger of pressure from Russia, China and India for autonomous development. (p. 43)

Although post-Taliban some changes and advancements are visible in Kabul and larger cities, women, especially in rural settings, still cannot fully practise their rights. After the fall of the Taliban under Hamid Karzai's government, the constitution promised women equal rights; however, women remain vulnerable today (Kabir, 2012). Furthermore, girls and girls' schools are frequently targeted in the areas under Taliban control (Khan, 2012). Taliban violence against women still exists in rural areas (Kabir, 2012), and less is known about women's progress in rural areas (Khan, 2012).

The 2011 survey by the Thomas Reuters Foundation identifies Afghanistan as the most dangerous place for women. Despite the reforms in law, women still face heartbreaking incidents in Afghanistan. The lynching of 27 years old Farkhuda in March 2015 was one such incident in the center of Kabul city. Similarly, 19 years old Rokhshana was stoned to death by the Taliban militias in Ghor province in November 2015.

Likewise, Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016-2017 indicates that child marriages, especially for girls, remain widespread – 28 percent of girls were married before turning 18 years old; and four percent of girls were married even before they turned 15 years old. Moreover, the

survey indicates that female participation in the economy is low; female labour force participation is 26.8 percent compared to 80.6 percent of the male labour force.

Refining laws in favour of women's rights are only one part of the more considerable challenge of achieving success in the pathway to gender equality. However, assuring the practice and implementation of those laws is the other part. Even today, women face opposition for their activities outside the home settings by Islamic groups, who are now part of the government (Emadi, 2015). Therefore, it is worth exploring that changes such as placing women in higher positions as parliament members, ministers, and governors are to promote women's rights or mere tokenism.

Afghan Media

Progress in the media sector in Afghanistan since 2001 has been exceptional (Altai, 2010; Medley, 2010). During the Taliban period, television, radio, and music were banned (Medley, 2010); only state-controlled radio, Sharia radio, that broadcast the laws by the Taliban to remind people of their duty to the country and Islam (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Osman, 2012). Post-Taliban, the media growth in Afghanistan has been extraordinary; telecommunications – mobile phones, mass media – television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and Internet are easily accessible, particularly to the urban population. Over eight million Afghans have handsets (Medley, 2010); 68.7 percent of Afghans use television and 69.9 percent use radio as sources of information and news (Akseer et al., 2018). Although Internet usage is proliferating, it remains a medium dominantly used by urban males, and women's use of Internet remains low, both in rural and urban settings (23.2 percent men and 5.6 percent women use Internet) (Akseer et al., 2019).

Like other areas – social, economic, political – the media sector was significantly affected by the war during Mujahideen and the Taliban. Although, since 2001, the Afghan media have grown

considerably, it is worth mentioning that the development of the media sector in Afghanistan is not exclusively the product of the United States-led invasion and establishment of a new government structure. Before the 1950s, mass media existed in Afghanistan; however, in a limited number (Wilber, 1962). The first weekly publication was *Shams-al-Nehar* (light of the day), established during Emir Sher Ali Khan in 1873 (Rawan, 1992). Rawan (2002) argues that *Shams-al-Nehar* was not the result of the socio-economic structure of that period but rather the advocacy of few intellectual elites, influenced by Europe's technological and scientific advancements and some Islamic states' development. However, due to political disputes, the *Shams-ul-Nehar* operation was suspended (Rawan, 2002).

In 1906, Mahmoud Tarzi, known as the founder of the press in Afghanistan, established *Seraj-al-Akhbar* (Rawan, 2002). Since *Seraj-al-Akhbar* supported Afghanistan's total national independence, it was also quickly banned by the British authorities (Habib, 1985, as cited in Rawan, 2002). However, in 1911 Tarzi once again initiated the bi-monthly newspaper *Seraj-al-Akhbar Afghania*, which, according to Rawan (2002), was a significant milestone in forming the basis of modern Afghan media and journalism. During King Amanullah's rule, 23 state-owned and private newspapers and magazines operated in Kabul (Grevemeye, 1987, as cited in Rawan, 2002), including *Ershad-e-Niswan*, the first women's magazine (Rawan, 2002). Prime Minister Daoud is considered the first politician who used the media to promote his economic and foreign policies (Rawan, 2002). By the end of the monarchy, Afghanistan had 70 different dailies, weeklies, trade publications, and tabloids (Rawan, 2002).

Before to the PDPA administration, the former states worked to operationalize Article 11 of the 1923 Afghan constitution that maintained freedom of expression. However, the PDPA

administration, despite improving the technical processes of the press and increasing circulation, took over and controlled the majority of media outlets (Rawan, 1992).

The first Afghan radio station was Radio Kabul, established in 1925 (Rawan, 2002; Wilber, 1962). Radio Kabul broadcast news from Afghanistan and the world, including agricultural recommendations, government and official announcements, and music as entertainment components (Rawan, 2002). Radio Kabul, according to Wilber (1962), was the most potent instrument of government propaganda.

According to Rawan (2002), “plans to develop an Afghan television system were first established under the government of Prime Minister Daud” in the late 1970s. In the early 1980s, the national television station started its six-hours daily transmission in Kabul (Rawan, 2002). Besides Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Khost, Jalalabad, Ghazni, Farah, and Faizabad also owned local television stations (Rawan, 2002). Like the press and radio, television was also destroyed by Mujahideen and the Taliban. Although during Mujahideen, there was an irregular television broadcast but during Taliban television was entirely banned.

On November 18, 2001, the state-owned television broadcast resumed in Afghanistan (Rawan, 2002). By 2005, about 30 independent radio stations, with foreign aid agencies’ assistance, were set up around the country, and several more operated in Kabul (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). The progress of the media in Afghanistan happened with the support of the international community. Countries like the USA, Germany, UK, India, and Japan provided financial support to the media sector (Hok, 2015). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) funded the country’s first women-operated FM station *Voice of Afghan Women* (Sakeeneh, 2001).

Although radio is a dominant source of information and news, television is becoming the most commonly used medium in Afghanistan (Broadcast Board of Governors, 2015). The majority of TV owners are in urban centers. The Asia Foundation's 2018 survey, *Afghanistan in 2018: A survey of the Afghan people*, found no gender differences in getting news and information from television. An almost equal number of women and men use television for information and news (68.1 percent females and 69.3 percent of males) (Akseer et al., 2018).

The media progress has not been without challenges, though. Indeed, the media sector has seen growth in number and quality, but financial stability is still a challenge (Hok, 2015). Furthermore, television came under pressure by prominent religious authorities in 2005 for broadcasting, what they called, *un-Islamic* material such as dancing and singing (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). Self-censorship is reportedly widespread, and violence and women's rights topics are covered cautiously (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). Although the Afghan constitution allows freedom of media, in reality, the media sector faces numerous sociopolitical challenges (Hok, 2015).

On the one hand, the constitution allows freedom of media; on the other hand, some laws restrict offending authorities in power and criticism of religion (Hok, 2015). Moreover, journalists and reporters face challenges and risks to their lives for the job they do. Reporter San Frontière declared Afghanistan one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists in 2018.

Despite the challenges and problems, media are seen as an essential part of Afghan society. Alta consulting 2005 report concludes that media play a vital role in Afghan society not only for information or entertainment but also for education. Similarly, Khalvatgar (2014) asserts that if the media sector continues to progress, and media employees gain respect among all industries, media can likely play a vital role in Afghanistan's future progress. Media, according to Akseer et al.

(2018), are a critical source of the portrayal of women that differ from the traditional, conservative roles imposed during the Taliban era. Television and the Internet significantly impact perceptions of women's rights (Akseer et al., 2018). Afghans who rely on information and news from television and the Internet are more supportive of equal educational opportunities for women and men (Akseer et al., 2018). Asia Foundation 2018 survey of the Afghan people further found that since television exposes Afghans to the notion of women working outside the home, those who use television are more likely to support women working outside.

Additionally, women's participation in the media has increased since the fall of the Taliban. According to Nai – supporting open media in Afghanistan – March 2017 media watch report, women make 17 percent of total media workers, and women's presence increased despite problems and challenges. Some NGOs working for women's rights and empowerment use radio programmes to educate women on critical gender issues and get their message across (Sakeeneh, 2001). Women's magazines, filmmaking companies, and radios work collaborate with women's rights organizations to portray women's problems through creative art-writing, plays, and talk shows (Hassanzadeh, 2018).

Although women's participation in the media industry is remarkable, this progress remains centred in Kabul. Women's involvement in the media, particularly in the television medium, remains low in rural areas (Hassanzadeh, 2018). Furthermore, despite the increased women's participation in the media in Kabul and urban settings, women face challenges to enter the media sector in the first place (Hassanzadeh, 2018). The challenges involve convincing and persuading family and, at times, the tribe, gender disparity in employment, and opposition against the free media (Hassanzadeh, 2018). Moreover, the cultural and social conservatism that exists in Afghan

society limits women's participation in the media and coverage of social issues such as women's rights, sexuality, and religion (Saboor, 2015).

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The study's theoretical framework is shaped by feminism, feminist media studies, feminist reception studies, encoding/decoding model, and Entertainment Education strategy. Through utilizing the mentioned theories, models, and strategies, an attempt is made to understand the text, readers, the socio-cultural and historical contexts of reader and text, and readers' reactions to the text.

Feminist Theory

Feminism as a cultural and political movement aims to change women's and, in general, society's outlook about women; and shape how women and men live their lives and interpret the world (Hannam, 2012). In other words, the feminist movement aims "at undoing domination and oppression" (Steiner, 2014, p. 359). For this purpose, historically, individuals and groups across different nations have demanded reforms to better women's status. Prominently, today living in the era of #metoo and #timesup movements, feminism is occupying a significant part of social and political discourses. As Beasley (1999) states, "even if [feminism] is not viewed in the same light by everyone" (p. x). The meaning of feminism differs for everyone; it may even change at different times and places. For example, in its primary meaning, feminism aims for equality between men and women. From a more complex perspective, feminism challenges discriminations based on biological differences of sex or socially constructed gender expressions (Benshoff, 2016). Feminists in the West and around the globe have defined, labelled, and classified their movements differently (Benshoff, 2016).

Since the time women began fighting for their rights and equality, feminism as theory, discourse, political ideology, and social movement has been debated, transformed, and has

broadened its scope and meaning (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Today it asks new questions, brings new shreds of evidence, and challenges methods, notions, and developments in different academic disciplines, be it humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2015). However, early feminist theory generalized women's oppression ignoring the differences among women – race, class, gender, and abilities (Gallagher, 2005). Today, the focus has shifted from the “politics of shared female experience” to the acknowledgement of differences within the group *woman* to avoid generalization of experiences and construction of “a singular truth about womanhood” (Fenton, 2004, p. 84). Different groups of women – *third world women*, women of color, and working-class, have questioned the term for decades on whether a term connected to western roots, mainly white and bourgeois, can apply to women of other backgrounds and situations (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Ignoring the differences excluded Black, Lesbian, Asian feminists, *third world feminists*, and those who did not identify as white feminists; thus, this exclusion challenged the notion of *we* in feminism.

Consequently, the term has come to include different “experiences and positionalities” (Byerly & Ross, 2006, p. 3). It should also be acknowledged that women's movements have diverse histories fashioned by culture, economy, political fabrications, and colonial relations (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Feminist theories have evolved, developed, and changed throughout history. The deeper feminists looked into gender inequality's extensiveness in society, the more complex views about gender developed (Lorber, 1997).

Historically, women's and girls' experiences and perspectives have been excluded and left out from mainstream social and political thoughts. Feminists often argued that mainstream social and political thoughts believe in women's subordination in political and social life; therefore, it is not regarded as a significant political issue (Beasley, 1999). Consequently, feminist writers and

commentators criticize mainstream social and political thoughts on their focus mainly on men (Beasley, 1999). Since in the Western context, and in every other context, “to speak of men is taken as speaking universally” (Beasley, 1999, p. 8), women’s perspectives are often marginalized and concealed. As French enlightenment thinker François Poulain de la Barre (1647-1732) argues, what is written by men about women should be looked at critically since men are “both judge and interested party in the conflict” (cited in van der Tuin, 2009, p. 8). Principal to feminist believes is that women’s conditions are social constructs and possible to change (Hannam, 2012). Therefore, women should be heard, represent themselves and their views, and achieve self-sufficiency in their lives (Hannam, 2012).

Women around the globe have been standing up against inequalities and discrimination throughout history. To organize in chronological order, feminism movements are often divided into three waves:

- First wave (late 19th and early 20th century): Suffrage movements – the right to vote
- Second wave (the 1960s-1970s): Broadened the debate on the workplace, sexuality, family, and reproductive rights; and the emergence of *other oppressed* groups such as people of color, non-binary persons, and *third world* women challenging the White feminism approach; and
- Third wave (the 1980s-2000s): Focused on individualism and diversity and challenged the notion of universal womanhood (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006).

The present era can be classified as fourth-wave feminism, the era of new technologies such as the Internet, social media, and smartphones with cyberactivism and the emergence of #metoo and #timesup movements. Moreover, many approaches have been birthed from the feminist movement over the years, such as radical feminism, liberal feminism, cultural feminism, Marxist feminism, and post-structural feminism, to name a few, which enunciates that feminism should be understood as *feminisms* (Benshoff, 2016). Similarly, defining feminism is not possible since the

movement has always encompassed a wide range of attitudes, concerns, and strategies (Hannam, 2012). Therefore, it is required not to define feminism only from a particular prospect. As there are several definitions of feminism, there are as many feminist theories. However, the core objective is equality among sexes, gender, sexual orientations, races, classes, and abilities. The areas that feminist theory focuses on include exclusion and discrimination bases on sex, gender, class, race, age, sexuality, and (dis)abilities; objectification; structural and economic inequality; power and oppression; gender roles and stereotypes; and others.

The term “féminisme” designated women’s emancipation and was initially used in France in political debates in the late nineteenth century (Hannam, 2012). The first woman who identified herself as a “féministe” was Hubertine Auclert, the French women’s suffrage advocate (Hannam, 2012, p. 7). In the early nineteenth century, terms such as *women’s movement* and *women’s rights* were more common than feminist and feminism (Hannam, 2012).

Women’s movements worldwide are central in the development of feminist theory and influence how women are perceived in different fields such as politics, economics, social, religion, and media (Mueni, 2014). The prominent point feminists have stressed about gender inequality is that it is not an individual matter, rather deeply rooted in societies’ structure. Many factors, such as culture, economy, politics, religion, and language, cause gender inequalities (Lorber, 1997). Hence, feminism is distinct from mainstream social and political thoughts because it acknowledges women’s marginalization and attempts to subdue it. Furthermore, feminist theorists shifted the focus from *only* men’s experiences and perspectives. They developed more inclusive social theories that aim to understand gender inequalities and focus on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality (Lorber, 1997). Feminist theory is essential in studying women’s representations in all areas as it reconceptualizes what counts as knowledge and power. Thus, feminism challenges

the existing cultural norms in politics, economy, philosophy, literature, popular media, and other fields and looks at them from a critical lens (Haralovich & Rabinovitz, 1999).

Sex and Gender: Social Constructs

Before discussing feminist media and television studies and representations of gender relations in the media, it is essential to decode gender and sex concepts and the distinguish between them. Therefore, I am briefly presenting debates around biology and the social construction of sex and gender, discussed by feminist scholars such as Judith Butler. These discussions will touch on the impacts of socialization, gender expression, and gender performativity to support discussions on the social construction of gender in the media.

Gender researchers and feminist scholars initiated the discourse on the distinction between sex and gender in the early years of second-wave feminism (Carter, 2012). Debates around the distinction between gender and sex is key to the feminist efforts challenging the claim that anatomy is destiny, which understands sex as the invariant and gender as the cultural meaning to the sex (Butler, 1986). Sex is usually defined as the biological differences between men and women. At the same time, gender encompassed certain socially constructed behaviours and characteristics attributed to each sex. According to these definitions, sex is biology, which makes it fixed and natural, and gender a social construct, which means it is not fixed and changes over time and space. Butler (2006), on the distinction of sex and gender, further asserts that if sex is biology and gender a social construct, then gender is neither the result of sex and nor follows sex.

Although gender as a social construct is not fixed and can change, it is still presumed that a man and woman should exhibit standard behaviours labelled as masculine and feminine. At the same time, such dichotomies are not evident at all times. For instance, a man is expected to be the breadwinner and a woman the family caretaker. However, in certain cultures, societies, and

situations, the roles are reversed. Similarly, people are classified into a sex binary system of being a male and a female, based on their external genitalia, penis in males and vagina in females (Wood, 2015). However, intersex individuals may not be included in either of the categories. Thus, the notion of sex being a biological concept and fixed is questionable. As Butler (2014) argues, “the category of ‘sex’ is... normative” (p. 2). She continues,

sex is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. (pp. 1-2)

Butler is critical of defining sex and gender in a binary structure. She sees the binarist structure as oppressive and exclusive.

For Butler, gender is an act, a performance. As she argues, gender is created by the various acts through repetition; thus, if these acts are not performed, there would be no gender (1988). Hence, if it is argued that gender is performative, then there are no pre-existing identities by which gender can be measured. Therefore, there is no right or wrong, true or false, in doing gender (Butler, 1988). Similarly, Wood (2015) argues, “biology influences how we develop, but it does not determine behaviour, personality, and so on. Nor does biology stipulate the meaning that members of a culture assign to sex” (p. 21).

As mentioned earlier, gender includes certain socially and culturally constructed behaviours and characteristics assigned to each sex. The socially and culturally constructed categories and behaviours to distinguish between genders are based on a narrow understanding of biological differences (Carter, 2012). Radical and liberal feminists define gender as an inevitable consequence of sex differences that lie in the binary system of sexes considered universal (van Zoonen, 1994). These constructed categories create a false binary system that ignores the fact that neither everyone fits this binary, nor can identify or want to identify with the characteristics set

out. For example, transgender and queer individuals do not fit in the binary system of sex and gender. They have biological characteristics of one sex but identify as the other (Wood, 2015). According to this view, differences between man and woman are human constructs, not fixed, and may change over time based on class, race, and geography. This argument underpins Simone de Beauvoir's statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1973, as cited in Butler, 1988, p. 519). The term *becoming* illustrates that developing as a woman or a man is a process, and this process may include different factors such as culture, social values, language, and traditions.

Society enforces *becoming* a woman or man by imposing performative behaviours prescribed for women and men. Performing gender as a woman or a man is learned throughout the lifespan; thus, it is not an individual or a personal process, but rather a set of ideas (Wood, 2015) transferred to us through different cultural agents. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) asserts, gender is a historical idea. If it is assumed that gender is defined by sex, a person born with female sex should naturally identify with female characteristics. Nevertheless, as Butler points out, gender is not something we have; instead, we perform (1990). Gender is a historical construction and changes over time and geography and operates through the repetition of norms (Butler, 1988); therefore, it is by no means a universal and supernatural system (van Zoonen, 1994).

Gender norms, like social norms, are derived and delivered through socializing agents such as family, school, culture, and the media. Media, as a socializing agent, disseminate gendered images. In a heterosexual society, and one that we live in, sex and gender are defined in a binary system; hegemonic masculinity and subordinate femininity are the gender images that predominate other images (Connell, 1993). Media, particularly television, plays a crucial role in circulating

these stereotypical images along with other institutions. As Press (1991) notes, television's constant flow of these stereotypical images influences how we see ourselves.

Likewise, humans interact through symbols that create meanings for them (Wood, 2015). Each of us interprets symbols such as words, texts, pictures, and behaviours based on our cultural understanding. Similarly, interpretations of feminine and masculine activities are based on our cultural understanding of them. For instance, in this supposedly universal binary system, emotionalism, care, cooperation, collective sense, and compliance are associated with femininity, while the opposite characteristics such as rationality, efficiency, competition, individualism, and ruthlessness are associated with masculinity (van Zoonen, 1994; Wood, 2015).

When gender is defined and simplified in binary, it ignores the different gender identities and experiences. As Killermann (2013) argues, defining a group merely based on its biological sex in a stereotypical way can limit individuals to express themselves in a way that may differ from presupposed male and female behaviour and create discriminatory attitudes and internalized oppression. For instance, when television, particularly in Afghanistan, where television is a significant source of information and entertainment, depicts gender relations stereotypically, maintaining them as *natural* can rationalize and support the patriarchal system.

Although traditional gender relations have been challenged for decades by feminist movements, society and the media still reflect distinct gender relations and notions of masculinity and femininity based on the conventional and stereotypical definitions of gender by following dominant cultural discourse on gender. In the present times, children are assigned their gender even before being born through *gender reveal parties* and thus are expected to conform, act, and perform as *appropriate* to express their assigned gender when born. Such socialization may challenge the concept of *becomes* in Beauvoir's statement that, for me, connotes the notion of

choice. If one *becomes* demonstrates choice, then can pre assigning gender through a *gender reveal parties* and appropriation of behaviours through social norms question the notion of choice? In this sense, Butler (1986) claims that Beauvoir's theory of gender "entails a reinterpretation of the existential doctrine of choice whereby 'choosing' a gender is understood as the embodiment of possibilities within a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms" (p. 37). Hence, the body is ought not to be seen as a passive that inscribes cultural codes but instead acts and enacts interpretations within existing cultural orders (Butler, 1988). In today's society, gender non-conforming and gender-fluid individuals resist the notion of the gender binary. They express themselves in non-traditional ways that indicate that gender can be expressed in different ways. Therefore, neither emotionality and caring nor toughness and assertiveness are explicit behaviours of one specific gender.

In this study of the representations of gender relations in soap operas on television, I define gender as a social construct that society perpetuates through assumed and stereotypical behaviours considered as *appropriate* and *normal* for women and men. Challenging the gender binary and recognizing the different gender expressions and experiences, I analyze how the transnational soap operas depict different gender expressions.

Feminist and Media Studies

Over the years, women's portrayals in the mass media have focused on feminist media scholarship (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Feminist and gender studies are among the critical research fields in communication and media studies (Mendes & Carter, 2008). Their emergence, as Mendes and Carter (2008) argue, cannot be discussed separately. Although feminist theories in communication also emphasize explaining and studying gender and gendered power within communicative texts (Cuklanz, 2016). Historically, communication research was criticized by

feminists for not including women's perspectives in the research. Unlike media studies, gender in media did not gain much academic interest until 1970 (Krijnen & Bauwel, 2015). Research in the communication and media fields were mainly male-biased and assumed that their male counterparts – fathers or husbands – influence women's behaviors and thinking (Krijnen & Bauwel, 2015; Tuchman, 1978). During the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, women's groups questioned many local television stations for their sexist and discriminatory representations of women (van Zoonen, 1994). According to Gallagher (2003), it was the political push that first shaped feminist media analysis (Gallagher, 2003). United Nations International Decade for Women (1975-85) also stimulated the debate on women's subordination at the global level, and UNESCO documented the media as a source of women's oppression (Gallagher, 1981). These early analyses of the media demonstrate how media were involved in the patterns of discrimination against women through symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978). The denunciation of women's position in media focused on two key points: analysis of women's systemic subordination through power structures and women's objective position rather than subjective in the politics of representation and knowledge production (Gallagher, 2003). Therefore, a critical feminist perspective on communication began to debate and research on gender and media (Matos, 2019). Feminist readings of media text have been central to an understanding of media representations' power and have posed a significant challenge to both the content and the methods of older forms of media studies.

Feminist media scholarship widened its scope since its early studies in the 1980s that initially classified feminist media studies into socialist, radical, liberal, and cultural theoretical and political orientations (Gallagher, 2003; van Zoonen, 1991). Feminist media scholarship widened its scope since its early studies in the 1980s that initially classified feminist media studies into socialist,

radical, liberal, and cultural theoretical and political orientations (Gallagher, 2003; van Zoonen, 1991). Although in the 1860s, feminists in Britain and the United States initiated campaigns on women's treatment and representations in newspapers and magazines (Lowe, 2007), the second-wave feminist movement is considered an entry point for feminist studies into the communication field in the West, particularly (Gill, 2007; Mendes & Carter, 2008). Feminist research during the second-wave feminist movement focused on films, prime-time television, dramas, newspapers, pornography, news magazines, popular music, comic books, advertisements, and soap operas (Carter & Steiner, 2004).

With the emergence of academic work on gender in media, feminist research focused on three themes: stereotypes and social roles, ideology, and pornography (Krijnen & Bauwel, 2015). Over the years, numerous studies have focused on the mentioned themes with new perspectives and questions such as intersectionality and diversity in gender representations in media. The second-wave feminist movement is considered an entry point for feminist studies into the communication field in the West, particularly (Gill, 2007; Mendes & Carter, 2008). Feminist research during the second-wave feminist movement focused on films, prime-time television, dramas, newspapers, pornography, news magazines, popular music, comic books, advertisements, and soap operas (Carter & Steiner, 2004).

Some of the prominent scholars in gender and media, among others, are Angela McRobbie, Brundson Charlotte, Dorothy Hobson, Janice Winship, Laura Mulvey, and Gaye Tuchman. While the movements and research in media and gender studies were happening in the North American context and Europe, movements were also befalling in the *third world* context. For example, *Women in Media* emerged in Bombay city in India in the late 1980s and the *National Committee of Women for a Democratic Iran* (NCWDI) was founded by Iranian feminists living in exile in the

United States during the 1990s (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Some of the main activities and achievements of the mentioned groups were challenging sexist media images, discrimination against women journalists, and lack of women's coverage in the news, raising awareness about discriminations, abuse, and murder of women in Iran under the Islamic fundamentalist regime, ruling since 1979 (Byerly & Ross, 2006). In 2004, NCWDI merged with *Women's Forum Against Fundamentalism in Iran* (WFAFI), an international organization based in Boston (Byerly & Ross, 2006). WFAFI advocates for women's rights and religious pluralism in Iran and other nations with fundamentalist governments and is affiliated with groups such as the European Organization Against Fundamentalism and the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Movements, activism, and research, as such taking place around the globe, make media representations a significant interest for both popular and academic feminist struggles that continue until today. Today in the Internet and smartphones era, most of us have regular access to all kinds of programs such as news, films, and pornography, which can be shared with others in just a click. With such approachability, one can argue that the media's influence is even more prominent today than before (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Earlier works on media from a feminist perspective have argued that feminist media scholars should explore how feminist work is rooted in the values, ideas, and language in society (Byerly, 2008). One such way is to examine how media represent gender relations, femininity and masculinity, and stereotyping.

Feminist media theory. Feminism has always “regarded ideas, language, and images as crucial in shaping women's (and men's) lives” and explored how language, both vocabulary and linguistics, usage defines and confines women (Kuhn, 2013, p. 2). The core objectives of feminist studies in the media and communication fields are to examine representations of gender relations, audiences' interpretations of those representations, and media experts' contribution in

disseminating sexual inequalities (Mendes & Carter, 2008). Feminist media studies focus on how gender is communicated within the media (van Zoonen, 1994). As mentioned earlier, the initial concerns of feminists were the messages – the sexist messages – disseminated through media that promoted stereotypical sex-roles as being *natural* and *normal* (Carter & Steiner, 2004). Thus, Steiner (2014) argues that feminist media theory “relies on feminist theory. That is, it applies philosophies, concepts, and logics articulating feminist principles and concepts to media processes such as hiring, production, and distribution; to patterns of representation in news and entertainment across platforms; and to reception” (P. 359).

One of the seminal works on feminist media or feminist theory in communication studies has been Gaye Tuchman’s *the symbolic annihilation of women* by the mass media (1978). In this work, Tuchman problematizes women’s representations in the media and expands on the idea of symbolic annihilation, initially used by George Gerbner in 1976, to argue women’s absence in the media. Tuchman not only discusses the absence of women in the media but also their stereotypical representations. Tuchman (1978) divides the concept of symbolic annihilation into three aspects: absence, trivialization, and condemnation. Women are either not represented or underrepresented in media, and the little representation that they get is as disapproved, devalued, and passive subjects to be guarded (Tuchman, 1978). Additionally, in the 1977 United States commission on Civil Rights report documented how women and people of color were stereotyped and underrepresented in prime-time television dramas and news (as cited in Steiner, 2014). The report highlights the issue of stereotyping and under-representing women and people of color in U.S. television and the importance of television as a medium.

Similarly, Mulvey (1988) also argues that cinema allows men to objectify women for the male gaze. Mulvey (1988) describes men viewers as active consumers while females as passive

pleasures for men in cinema. However, Mulvey's arguments were later challenged by the active viewer claims. The argument's key outcome was that women in cinema were merely represented as sexual and decorative objects to reinforce male power. Gallagher (1981) conducted a review of the early literature on women and media from different regions. In her review, she concluded that women are absent and ignored in media, particularly in television and radio in almost every region.

Additionally, women working in the media argued about the lack of opportunities for women working in the media, particularly in high-ranking and functional positions (Gill, 2007). Other groups such as women outside academia and the media industry argued about the stereotypical, degrading, and sexist representations of women in, for example, advertisements (Gill, 2007). Feminists focusing on the media recognized that to challenge such portrayals in the media and popular culture, it is essential to have empirical evidence (Carter & Steiner, 2004).

Initial studies in the field of feminist media focused on sex-role stereotypes from a white, middle-class, and liberal research perspective (Gallagher, 2003) and fewer discussions on the portrayal of women and less engagement with gender, race, and sexuality discourses (CCCS women's group, 1978, as cited in Gill, 2007). Feminist scholars such as Noreene Janus argued for holistic research on media content and the analyses of economic imperatives of media industries and audiences' perceptions (1977, as cited in Gallagher, 2003).

These feminist research and activism in the media in the early 1960s and 1970s were substantial and significant as they laid the foundation for feminist media studies in the West. Also, a larger portion of studies on women in the media, written in the English language, focus on women in the Western cultures, problematize gender relations that often attend plotlines, especially where women are lead characters, and homogenize the category of *woman* that is nearly always white (Byerly & Ross, 2006).

Post-structural feminism rejects the binary system of categorizing masculine and feminine as being metaphysics or biological and stresses their social construction (Enriques, 2000; Kaplan, 1992). Post-structuralist feminism argues that gender is socially constructed by the patriarchal language order (Enriques, 2000), and as such, it emphasizes analyzing language order which teaches us to be *woman* and *man* to bring beneficial changes (Kaplan, 1992). Post-structuralist feminism studies “the symbolic system” (p. 196) in television and film, through which we communicate to understand how we learn to be *woman* or *man* (Kaplan, 1992). Post-structuralist feminism is often non-essentialist in contrast to the previously discussed three types (Kaplan, 1992) and is critical of the three approaches for their critics of the media as not being *realistic*, and assuming viewers, in this case women, passive takers of patriarchal media messages (Enriques, 2000). For post-structuralism, audiences do not necessarily produce and decode the text meanings as encoded by producers; instead, there is a continuous negotiation of meaning and reality between the text, reader, and media institutions (Enriques, 2000).

For this study, I employed the post-structuralist feminist approach to analyze the content of soap operas and interpretations of study participants of the representations of gender relations in soap operas. Moreover, in doing so, I acknowledge that my interpretations of soap operas' content concerning representations of gender relations are likely to be different from the participants; as post-structuralist perspective argues that viewers can define meanings and realities in several and often contradictory ways based on different factors such as culture, background, and ideology. Thus, a post-structuralist approach allows me to present different perspectives and interpretations of soap operas' content by participants and myself.

Post-colonial feminism and media studies. As an essential field, post-colonial studies theorize colonial logic, transnational inequalities, and post-colonial rationalities and challenge

Western knowledge (Shome, 2016). Global South and non-Western subjects are often described as essentialized and unified *Other* in Western literature. Hence, post-colonial scholarships explore the fluidity of these identities.

Similarly, postcolonial feminist theory challenges the generalization and appropriation of the *third world* and women of color experiences and representation of *third world* and women of color as monolithic, passive victims, and ahistorical subjects. As Mohanty in her often-cited article, *Under the Western eyes*, asserts, “it is in this process of homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and named” (p. 335). Historically, in Western white feminist literature, what Syed and Ali (2011) describe as “a tortured relationship” (p. 352), white women are represented as powerful and saviours to subjugated women of color who need rescue. Challenging the representations of women of color by white feminist, postcolonial women’s movements in different areas have challenged the notion that women’s activism in the post-colonial world are merely inspired by the West (Loomba, 2015). As Ball (2012) states, a post-colonial feminist perspective “combines the insight of both post-colonialism(s) and feminism(s) to the intersecting power structures of colonial and patriarchal oppression” (p. 2).

In media studies, considering post-colonial criticism allows us to explore how *Eurocentric* discourses impact the production, distribution, and consumption of media text (Pillai, 1996). Furthermore, utilizing post-colonial frameworks in media studies challenges the existing Western assumption about the history, development, and functioning of mass media (Shome, 2016). Similarly, Kumar and Parameswaran (2018) assert that previous studies seeking to theorize relationships between dominant Western media and cultural institutions and non-Western societies often lacked attention to human experiences, holistic explanations of “non-Western subjectivity

and socio-historical contextualization of objects and sites” (p. 349). Kumar and Parameswaran (2018) further argue that:

...by taking seriously postcolonial theory’s claim that colonialism irreversibly altered the relationship between colonized subjects and their cultures in unfavorable ways, we can begin to unpack the re-orienting of cultural desire towards hegemonic colonial cultures. In so doing our discipline can foreground and critique a key modernizing process whose effects continue through and within the globalization of media and culture today. (p. 350)

Third World and minority filmmakers have presented their history by speaking their voices and controlling their images; however, their films do not present an *actual truth* against European/colonial *misrepresentations*, but instead, they present counter-truths and narratives that are informed by an anti-colonial perspective (Shohat & Stam, 2014).

Respectively, hooks (1992) asserts that Black female representations in the media determine how Blackness and Black people are seen and how other groups will respond to their representations based on their relations to these constructed images. Likewise, Bhasin (1994) also argues that it is not only essential to look at how women are depicted in the media or how many women are presented in the media but also to understand the “kinds of lives they lead,” “the status they have,” and “the kind of society we have” (p.4). Critics of this sort came from post-colonial feminist scholars who questioned methodological issues in feminist media studies (Gallagher, 2003). Similarly, Jiwani (2009) has critiqued Afghan women’s representation as passive victims in western media post 9/11 as a motif to justify and legitimize militarization. Likewise, Abu-Lughod (2013) argues that Western representations of Muslim women construct a singular, stereotypical, and monolithic picture of Muslim women ignoring historical, political, cultural, and social complexities. Such selective representation and appropriation of non-Western women’s cultural representations feed Western femininity and morality (Kumar & Parameswaran, 2018). Post-

colonial scholars are also concerned with how men's oppression under colonial domination makes it essential to examine depictions of both male and female roles.

Furthermore, more recent feminist media studies in non-Western contexts explore women and gender representations in films, television, magazines, and news. Kumari (2016) explores women's depiction in Indian media. According to Kumari (2016), women are often represented as objects in television advertisements. Similarly, Kharroub and Weaver (2008), in their study of transnational Arab television, assert that the women's portrayal in Arab media is not different from portrayals of women in media worldwide. They conclude that transnational Arab television contributes to promoting traditional gender stereotypes rather than challenging them (Kharroub & Weaver, 2014). Likewise, there are different arguments around women's representations on Turkish soap operas. For instance, Nawa (2017) states that some Turkish women believe that representations of women on Turkish soap operas can invoke some degree of autonomy, while others argue that they encourage sexism. It is not to deny that women's representations, in general, have changed and what we see on television and films today may not have been possible to portray 30 to 40 years ago. This change is visible in the Western media and global North and the global South. Today, Indian films have stronger female leads and films labelled as female-oriented, which might have been nearly to impossible a decade ago. Today female-oriented movies are doing better business and can, to some extent, compete with larger male lead films in India. Similarly, Banerjee and Kokade (2016) also conclude in their study that women's representations are changing, particularly in Indian cinema, as more positive trends are emerging. Particularly Muslim women who historically have been stereotyped in Indian films are being represented in more diverse manners (Banerjee & Kokade, 2016). As Byerly and Ross (2006) also state, "it is the case of art following life" (p. 35). The changes and progress for women in real are now also depicted in the reel, which

is due to women's involvement in film and program makings who challenge stereotypical versions of women's lives by taking the lead and producing their own stories (Byerly & Ross, 2006).

However, inequalities that women still face, such as unequal pay, discrimination, and unequal value in life, despite the progress, continue through their unequal and stereotypical depiction on the media even today. Women are still portrayed as sexual objects in the Western media, and in nations where media censorship dominates, women are still portrayed as sexual beings by censoring their bodies. Showing women as sexual beings and censoring them to avoid nudity and inappropriate portrayal reduces women to body parts and eliminates their subjectivity.

Television Studies

Television has changed tremendously in the last two decades, be it the programs, viewing experience, technology, or business (Gray & Lotz, 2019). Today, sources such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, and DisneyPlus have changed the ways we traditionally viewed television. The digitalization of television has increased accessibility. Now a days, television can be accessed inside the house, while travelling, or sitting in a café; “television is increasingly part of convergence culture” (Bignell & Lacey, 2014, p. 1). Television as a medium allows viewers to see the outside world from the interior space of the home. As Abu-Lughod (1995) affirms, television, among other forms of mass media, presents diverse and multiple experiences to its audiences without leaving the house. Despite the expansion of social media and its consumption, television has not lost its value (Gray & Lotz, 2019). Television, according to Miller (2010), “is more diverse, more diffuse, more popular, more powerful, and more innovative than ever” (p. 179). According to Abu-Lughod (2004), “television is a key institution for production of national culture in the context of Egypt” (p. 7). In the context of Afghanistan, Television is “at the heart of the most public and politically charged social movements and activisms” (Osman, 2018, p. 149).

Television, according to Miller (2010), should be understood as “a cultural, economic, and technological apparatus” (147).

Television’s arrival into the non-Western world was relatively late than the West (Rajagopal, 2000). Despite the transformation in television studies in terms of technology, audiences, and programming, it is still considered a historical U.S. and U.K. legacy (Oren & Shahaf, 2012). Thus, television studies in other nations are also “examined in terms of the persistent ‘general’ that is American and British television” (Oren & Shahaf, 2012, p. 1). Thus, such a perspective does not allow understanding television and television histories in a non-Western context (Tay & Turner, 2015). However, incorporating global and diverse perspectives into television studies has recently expanded and broadened the field’s scope (Oren & Shahaf, 2012). As Shome (2019) states,

As the Global South keeps proliferating every day, we need to theorize through experiences that emerge from Global South and keep them at the center of our intellectual and political imaginations. This not a call for nativism. If anything, it is a call for recognizing various transnational dimensions of the Global South and their ‘critical intimacy’ with the Global North. (p. 215)

Southeast Asian television studies are emerging. However, due to cultural, religious, and linguistic differences between East Asia and the Western world, these studies remain domestic (Fung, 2015) and rarely reach Western academia. In some Southeast Asian countries where political struggles and social movements are still common, television serves as a battlefield of different power and ideological groups. Therefore, television studies in such contexts are often linked to democratic movements and the rise of civil society and public spheres (Fung, 2015). Furthermore, in a non-Western society, television is tied to the national identity construction (Rajagopal, 2010; Tay & Turner, 2015). Therefore, television histories are not merely about the production of institutional and structural accounts but also about the role television played in producing and circulating the understandings of national identities (Tay & Turner, 2015). For instance, in India post-

independence from the British, the state established centralized television and radio to promote national integrity and communal harmony (McMillin, 2015). Moreover, all the programs were developed with a national perspective (McMillin, 2015). Similarly, in Singapore, television dramas, produced by the state-owned television stations, were used to cultivate national identity (Tay & Turner, 2015).

Tay and Turner (2015) further assert that

while television may not always be *qualitatively* different (that is, we may not always notice much variation in the kinds of texts produced), the *conditions* under which television is produced, distributed and consumed can vary markedly – and therefore so can the meanings it generates. (p. 4, italics in original)

Television, as a technology, has been effective as a “national informational infrastructure” by reaching both elite and non-elite audience across the demographics (Tay & Turner, 2015, p. 6).

Feminist Television Studies

Television has been studied in diverse ways, from anthropology to philosophy, sociology, and feminism. Feminists often look at how gender, class, race, sexuality, and (dis)abilities work on television. Feminist television studies grew in the late 1970s through mid-1980 (Spigel, 2004), albeit in the West. Feminist television studies discuss diverse feminist critiques of television – female audiences, *female* genres such as soap opera, the depiction of women, femininity, and feminism, and women in the television industry (Brunsdon, D’Acci, & Spigel, 1997; Lotz, 2001) and explore why these genres are meaningful to so many women viewers (Spigel, 2004). Studying television from feminist perspectives allow us to understand how television as a medium of entertainment and information, as it is considered, can structure and/or influence our daily life. For example, how soap operas can shape our behaviour, how a sitcom gives us pleasure, how news can

influence our political decision, how we make meanings of what we watch on television, and how can television construct the notion of masculinity and femininity in our everyday life?

Gray and Lotz (2019) organize intellectual influence on television studies in three approaches – social science, humanities, and cultural studies. Social science approaches focus on the effects and influence of television on audiences and society; the humanities approach of television studies mainly emerged from literary studies, film studies, and medium theory and focused more on textual analysis; and cultural studies approach unlike the mentioned other two approaches, focused on text and meaning (Gray & Lotz, 2019).

Many studies during the 1970s focused on audiences and their meaning-making processes adopting the cultural studies approach. Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding, Charlotte Brunson and David Morley's (1978, 1999) *Nationwide*, and Dorothy Hobson's (1982) study of British soap opera *Crossroads* are some of the studies that performed audience analysis in television studies.

Feminist perspectives informed much of the early work on television studies. The feminist studies of television were initiated “in the politically radical context of women's liberation movement, and at an historical [*sic*] time in North America and Europe where women were lobbying for changes in legislation” (McCabe & Akass, 2006, p. 108). According to Brunson (1993), it was between 1976 and mid-1980s that feminist television criticism as an area of study made its place in academia. Also, feminists' interest in television studies came from the fact that television is a persuasive and pleasurable medium; however, it offers a limited range of depictions in women's representations (Brunson et al., 1997). Cultural studies scholars explored media's relation to factors such as gender, class, and race (Gray & Lotz, 2019). Historically, similar to other aspects of society and arenas, the film and television industries have been dominated by men

as producers, directors, writers, and actors. The images of women and men are often constructed from male perspectives, which is mostly a patriarchal standpoint (Benshoff, 2016). Although, television is slightly different and diverse compared to the film industry, they still at times stand on traditional gender roles. Even today, despite the changes in the images of women and men, films are most likely to move around an active male protagonist with a passive female love interest (Benshoff, 2016). Benshoff (2016) further argues that “it is important to remember that film and television are ideological state apparatuses that work to maintain the status quo of dominant ideology” (p. 150) i.e., patriarchal ideology.

The initial feminist television studies argue that women’s oppression was very much related to their mass media representations and that changing the situation was possible and needed (Brunsdon, D’Acci, & Spigel, 1997). Arguably, the media in general and television in particular, as Byerly and Ross (2006) state, are the prime “definers and shapers” particularly in news agendas due to their broad range of audience and plays a vital role in “gendered framing of public issues and in the gendered discourse that they persistently promote” (p. 40). For example, if media merely report violence and crimes against women and fail to present women’s achievements and their views as leaders and professionals, it will likely represent women merely as victims and overlook their significant role in society (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Furthermore, depiction as such also ignores the fact that men can also be victims of serious crimes.

In Britain, the environment around television studies was slightly different than the United States as in Britain, television studies develop through the organizations and institutions outside academia (Gray & Lotz, 2019). The scholars working in these institutes and organizations developed methods of studying and analyzing “tele-vision” that were similar to the cultural and film studies and focused on television’s role in the British society (Kaplan, 1992). Their main

concern was “the social contexts within which television was viewed and might be taught” (Kaplan, 1992, p. 186) and received. However, universities in the United States were engaged in studying television’s content, social effects, and individual use patterns (Kaplan, 1992). However, feminist perspective was either not present or underdeveloped in the studies both in the United States and Britain, during the 1970s (Honeyford, 1980). Feminist work on film compared to television was more evident. For instance, in the 1960s the National Organization of Women studied images of women in film (Kaplan, 1992). Additionally, journals like *women and Film*, *Jump Cut*, and *Camera Obscura* discussed feminist approaches and feminist film theory, film screening, and conferences organized to introduce the independent work of women and women directors in Hollywood and around the world (Kaplan, 1992). However, events as such were not possible to set up around television due to factors such as television’s institutional model, methods of production and exhibition, and lack of data by women and about women (Kaplan, 1992). The reasons for the underdeveloped feminist work on television, according to Honeyford (1980), were “the massive dominance of the national broadcast television institutions with their insistence on large audiences” (p. 49) and less critical work on the subject.

Compared to the United States, Britain had fewer women in academic positions; thus, much of the film theory development was due to the efforts of women working as independent filmmakers (Kaplan, 1992). Since such an independent work on television, due to its production nature, was not easy, “the more feminist theory developed for film studies, the more it absorbed the interest of scholars who might have pioneered feminist approaches to television” (Kaplan, 1992, p. 187). By recognizing the lack of feminist work on television, some developments took place and identified main areas of concerns, i.e., women working in the television and television programmes developed by and about women (Honeyford, 1980). These developments initiated the

debates around the future of television in Britain and the Fourth Television Channel formation, which was intended to provide different and new institutional structures and kinds of producing and transmitting programmes on television (Honeyford, 1980). A focus on post-modern theory separated television studies from the film, cinema, and literary studies and allowed feminist critics to speak about television as an area linked to feminist film studies but independent and different (Brunsdon et al., 1997).

By the early 1980s, with the maturation of cinema studies, more and more female film scholars, both in the United States and Britain, began to work on women's representations on television (Kaplan, 1992). Casey, Casey, Calvert, French and Lewis (2008) argue that power relations construct particular types of representation on television; for example, the television industry's male-dominant structure constructs biases against women by objectifying and limiting their depictions. While in contrast, men's representations are often more diverse. As feminist criticism of television broadened its scope and included other genres such as sitcoms and detective programmes, employing textual analysis, explored how are "female types" constructed through these genres (Brunsdon et al., 1997, p. 9). Feminist studies reversed male-dominant studies to focus more on women and thus shifted the focus from male text such as news and sports to *female text* such as soap operas, romance novels, and magazines to explore how the mentioned texts reinforce dominant patriarchal ideology (Casey et al., 2008). Feminist television studies, over the past twenty years, have broadened its scope by exploring women's representations as housewives, single mothers, professionals, lesbians, feminists, and postfeminists; depiction of gender and sex in association to race and class; audiences and their viewing and interpretations; and issues of gender and sexuality in the context of nationalism, diaspora, and globalization (Spigel, 2004). Feminist scholarship on television initially studied audiences' engagement with television programmes and

very much relied on models of textual and discourse analysis that includes films, literature, and media studies (Carter & Steiner, 2004; Casey et al., 2008).

One of the significant contributions of feminist film theory is presenting an intricate understanding of the text, theories, and methods for exploring narratives (Lotz & Ross, 2004). The early feminist film critics analyzed women's images and the lack of their presence on screen and challenged the stereotypical roles in Hollywood movies (Lotz & Ross, 2004). Previous studies on gender on television (e.g., Tuchman, 1978; Gerbner & Signorielli, 1979) revealed that television portrays a gender normative world. Men are often seen as professionals in a job, and women are often portrayed in domestic settings with limited roles (e.g., mothers, wives) or as sexual objects (Casey et al., 2008).

Initial feminist work used textual approaches to study television, and the methods were derived from film and literary studies (Gray & Lotz, 2019). However, this approach was challenged by television scholars such as Fiske and Hartley (2003) who argued that television studies should go beyond the mere text. Fiske (1987) also argued that television text is polysemy, and no text has just one meaning. Going beyond textual analysis means understanding that television text can be read differently by different audiences (Gray & Lotz, 2019).

In the mid-1970s, feminist theorists studied popular films' structures and strategies of narration on guiding spectatorship in gendered terms and found that mainstream films use gender as a term of difference and identify women as the *Other* to men (Lotz & Ross, 2004). During the 1980s, feminist theorists provided rich debate on theorizing the relationship between films and viewers in the theoretical bases of psychoanalysis, semiotics, and structuralism (Gray & Lotz, 2019). Moreover, theorists who approached media studies from the British cultural studies framework also significantly contributed to the area of feminist television criticism, mainly in the

areas of audience research and studies of soap operas to discover “what audiences did with these texts” (Lotz & Ross, 2004, p. 189).

As mentioned earlier, today, feminist television studies have expanded its lens and sought to contest how gender, race, class sexuality, (dis)abilities, and nationalities are depicted, thus employing the intersectionality approach is significant. Feminist television studies informed by intersectionality “is an ongoing process of applying a variety of methodologies to answer questions that relate to the expansiveness of women’s experiences and how they have or have not been represented on television” (Haggins, 2018). Intersectionality as defined by Collins and Bilge (2016), is “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences” (p. 11). Intersectionality, as an analytical tool allows us to see social inequalities beyond only sex or gender and through interactions of different factors (Collins & Bilge, 2016) such as race/ethnicity, class, age, religion, and dis/ability.

Transnational Media

Since I am talking about imported soap operas in the Afghan television stations, it is essential to discuss transnational media and cross-border media flow. We live in an increasingly transnational media culture. Access to local and international media content through television and Internet has become not only easy but an everyday phenomenon. According to Iwabuchi (2002), “the accelerating flow of media images and people all over the globe not only generates the multiplicity of differences within a nation but also highlights the porousness of any apparently bounded culture entity” (pp. 51-52). As Livingstone argues communication does not “respect national boundaries” (p. 478). Christensen (2013) also argues that “transnational media flow and geopolitics come together as an ensemble generative of critique about how popular imagination,

expressions, and popular cultural products such as media texts position (and are positioned against) politics, space, and power” (p. 2407).

Transnational viewing of television dramas, series, and soap operas is not a new phenomenon. Studying transnational media has been vital in media and communications studies (Iqani & Resende, 2019). Several feminist media scholars have studied transnational media content and its effects on audiences. For example, Ang (1985) and Leibes and Katz (1990) have studied the cross-cultural readings of *Dallas*. Recent studies have explored transnational media, particularly transnational soap operas, in the Arab world and South Asia (e.g., Salamandra, 2012; Zafar, Arafat, & Sail, 2017). Previous studies show that transnational media viewing, and consuming is neither a new concept of study nor a past phenomenon.

Furthermore, with growing immigration around the globe, the consumption of transnational media is also growing. For instance, Lee and Cho (1990) studied Korean women in the United States and how watching Korean soap operas in the diaspora gave them a sense of connection to *home*. Similarly, transnational feminist media scholars such as Valdivia (2003) studied the media use among diasporic groups in the United States.

Gher and Bharthapudi (2004) define transnational media as “communication, information or entertainment that crosses international borders without the regulatory constraints normally associated with electronic media” (p. 2). The audience, while watching a regional or international (foreign) media content navigate through distances without moving from their homes, which as Jirattikorn (2008) states, make media “crucial components of transnationalism” (p. 32). In Afghanistan context, Afghans throughout history have been consuming transnational media content from Indian (Bollywood) and Iranian movies to Indian, Turkish, and Korean television series and soap operas.

Transnational media were often understood as media cultural flow from the West to East or American cultural icons and content, making their presence in the Eastern media (Özalpman, 2017). However, today, it is not merely the American and Western media content occupying space in the Eastern media. With local, national, and regional growth of broadcast markets, intra-regional media content is moving across the borders. Global South audiences consume media content produced and created in the Global North; however, local and regional content consumption is also increasing among Southern audiences; for instance, the increasing popularity of Turkish soap operas in Middle East (Iqani & Resende, 2019).

The initial transnational broadcasting intended to reach specific groups in the diaspora. For instance, Zee TV (1992) targeted the Hindi speaking audience in Asia; Asianet (1992) broadcast in Malayalam languages and targeted audiences across Asia and Gulf states (Aksoy, 2000). Similarly, MBC targeted Arabic-speaking audiences in Europe and TRT INT, based in Turkey, to help the Turkish diaspora keep national ties with Turkey (Aksoy, 2000). Transnational media, in this case, is an approach to connect communities across-borders and “outside groups into the midst of the national community” (Aksoy, 2000, p. 2). As Straubhaar (1991) argues, audiences’ first preference is national media content, and if that is not available, they favour media content that is similar to their culture that has more *cultural proximity*. Cultural factors such as language, religion, and clothing are essential in cultural proximity (Iwabuchi, 2002). Nevertheless, the question arises that do communities welcome and accept the *outside groups* (foreign content) through transnational media? Especially when it is not the diasporic community’s case, and the purpose is not *linking to home*, such as Turkish and Indian soap operas in Afghanistan.

Transnationally oriented media research has drawn from research on soap operas, particularly in the West (Georgiou, 2012). Abu-Lughod’s (2005) study of television in Egypt

illustrates that transnational television has played a significant role in shaping social and political discourses on modernity and providing a platform for women's self-making. Similarly, Georgiou (2012) asserts that since the 1980s, the Egyptian and Syrian soap operas, by touching some sensitive issues such as rape and stigmatization of women in the Arab world, have been successful across the Middle East (Hafez, 2008). Additionally, with transnational media flow, gender representations also flow across the borders; therefore, it is crucial to understand "gendered subject positions" constructed in and by media transnationally (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015, p. 49).

Soap Opera

Despite the growing popularity and demand for digital platforms such as Netflix, Amazon prime, and DisneyPlus, melodramatic soap operas continue to appeal to a substantial viewer base globally (T-Vine, 2017). Soap operas have a long history that can be traced back to nineteenth-century serialized novels published in newspapers in the United States that later evolved from print to film, radio, and television (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1989). In the 1940s, after World War II, soap operas transited from radio to television (Allen, 1985). The first daytime radio soap opera was "Painted Dreams," broadcast in the USA in 1930 (Allen, 1985). The American press first introduced the term soap opera in the 1930s, introducing a popular daytime series featuring domestic topics to the radio (Ahmed, 2012). The term soap referred to the sponsors, mostly household product companies that used these daytime programs to reach female audiences, specifically, housemakers, to advertise their products (Anitha, 2014; Marx, 2007); the term opera alluded to the forms of overly dramatized domestic situations presented in those series (Ahmed, 2012; Allen, 1985; Brown & Barwick, 1987).

Allen (1985) argues that the primary motive for developing soap operas was commercial, advertising, and selling household products. Since women in families are believed to have more

control over purchases, they were identified as the primary target audience for soap operas. It can be argued that soap opera played a vital role in transforming consumer culture by increasing female consumers into the household market .

When referring to soap operas, scholars provide different definitions; some define them based on their characteristics, and others define it based on viewers' understandings and standpoints (Mumford, 1995). For example, Brunson (1997) sees soap operas as “the paradigmatic television genre (domestic, continuous, contemporary, episodic, repetitive, fragmented, and aural)” (p. 121). Similarly, other scholars (e.g., Ang, 1985; Geraghty, 1991; Hobson, 1982) define soap opera as serialized TV programs that portray fictional stories of relationships, romance, and family that predominantly target female audiences. Also, Allen (1985) describes soap opera as a dramatic serial that features domestic crisis with little action but many emotions. According to Modleski (1982), soap opera typically involves number of families, composed of different generations, living in a small city among which one family will be of a socially *higher class*, and the rest will be middle-class. From the narrative perspective, soap operas are divided into two types: open soap operas that have no end and continue for years, and closed soap operas that eventually end (Ahmed, 2012). Blending these different definitions, we can define soap opera as a continuous series with repetitive patterns that deal with emotions, domestic life, and romance. Soap opera is generally understood as a daytime programme; however, as McCarthy (2015) states, it varies from country to country. For instance, in the United States, soap operas may refer to daily daytime series, while in other countries, they may refer to daily or weekly serials aired at different times – daytime or evening (McCarthy, 2015), for example, in India and Afghanistan.

Soap operas as television texts, according to Laroche (2019), “convey representations that narrate the culture of a particular society” and facilitate the transmission, reproduction, and thus, continuation of the culture (p. 62). Soap opera has been part and parcel of the lives of many people around the world, being among the most popular television programs positioned in close interaction with women audiences; it is one of the most famous genres on television and has built a close relationship with audiences (Aston & Clarke, 1994; Kielwasser & Wolf, 1989; Rogers, 1991). Similarly, in Afghan television channels, soap operas from other countries such as India and Turkey, dubbed in Dari and Pashto languages, the official languages of Afghanistan, compose a significant part of the broadcast.

Soap opera has traditionally been seen as a woman’s genre (Byerly & Ross, 2006) since soap opera features emotions, relationships, and romance and these characteristics are socially associated with the group *woman* (Geraghty, 2006). Research on soap operas has a long history in feminist discourses as such programs are considered the only fiction on television explicitly created for women (Rogers, 1991). Although soap operas are considered predominantly female programs, Ahmed (2012) argues that at least 30 percent of soap opera viewers are male. However, the content and presentation of a program may hold different meanings for men than women. Geraghty (2006) argues that the soap opera genre is valued among viewers because it displays emotional relationships similar to people’s daily lives.

Furthermore, soap opera displays *real life* emotions and crises in a fiction form to which viewers can easily relate (Czarniawska, Eriksson-Zetterquist, & Renemark, 2013). Soap operas also provide emotional release and escape from *real life* for most people (Brown, 1994; Stern, Russell, & Russell, 2007). Soap operas are intended to present an “illusion of reality” (Stedman, 1971, as cited in Wiergacz & Lucas, 2003, p. 71).

Since soap operas are associated primarily with women, the genre has become an area of research of particular interest to feminists (Aston & Clarke, 1994). Although soap operas have been one of the research areas for many feminist scholars since the 1970s (Brunsdon, 1995), soap operas faced a cultural devaluation during the nineteenth century (Allen, 1985). It can be argued that such devaluation is still visible today in some societies. Soap opera as an academic area of study has changed drastically since the 1970s; today, soap operas are studied in a broader range of academic disciplines (Brunsdon, 1995). The attention feminists have given to soap opera makes it an essential discourse of study and analysis. Brunsdon (1995) asserts that in the development of feminist television criticism, the genre of soap opera has played a substantial role. Brunsdon further argues that it is due to soap opera that feminist television criticism is widely visible in the field (1995). Although many studies focussing on the impact of soap operas on audiences have been conducted globally, more attention has been paid to general television content and less exclusively on the soap opera (Anitha, 2014; Wiergacz & Lucas, 2003).

Soap operas develop a world dominated by interpersonal relationships that allow discussion of, e.g., marriage, romance, family, and domestic problems (Ahmed, 2012). Yalkin and Veer (2018) assert that taboo topics such as sex, rape, and drinking that might be challenging to discuss openly can be discussed through soap operas. However, soap operas can be problematic in terms of the portrayal of women and femininity (Aston & Clarke, 1994). Soap operas, historically, are criticized for their stereotypical and *unrealistic* portrayal of women (Brunsdon, 1995). For instance, Wiergacz and Lucas (2003) studied women's portrayals in television soap operas broadcast on ABC and CBC television networks. They found that although men and women are presented equally in terms of numbers, women are not represented as equal to men. For instance, the researchers found that women portrayed in soap operas were mostly unemployed, while men

were all employed, a status that does not reflect reality in the United States workforce (Wiergacz & Lucas, 2003). In general, the media are male-dominant corporations like many other businesses and industries; thus, a significant negative influence of soap operas is that they substantiate male-dominant values (Brown, 1994; Motsaathebe, 2009; Stern, Russell, & Russell, 2007). Although soap operas depend on an already existing dominant discourse on society in their representations of the *real world*, these representations also contribute to our understanding of the world around us. As feminists argue, the dominant discourses are male-centred and marginalize and devalue women (Brunsdon, 1995).

Brunsdon (1995) gives four reasons for soap operas being of interest to feminists. According to Brunsdon (1995), soap opera is a compelling area of research in feminism because “they are seen as to be ‘about’ and ‘for’ women, they touch on personal relationships and domesticity, based on the notion of ‘personal is political,’ the term ‘soap opera’ has a metaphoric meaning” (p. 42). Early feminist works on the media mainly focused on stereotyping and categorized women’s representations in the media in two types: *sex-objects* and *housewives* (Brunsdon, 1995). Women have been targeted audience for makers of soap operas and focus of research as viewers of soap operas; however, evidence show that women are not the only and merely soap opera viewers (Brunsdon, 1995). One of the initial analyses of soap operas by feminists was that they are “the brainwash project of the mass media” (p. 41) for female viewers, making them think that they can only be housewives (Brunsdon, 1995). Thus, women viewers were thought to be require “consciousness-raising” (p. 41), while women on screen were less of interest in such analysis (Brunsdon, 1995).

Soap opera and realism. There are often questions on the degrees of realism in soap operas. For this study, the question arises as to whether foriegn soap operas aired on Afghan television

stations resemble viewers' life, and if so, how? How *real* are they? Moreover, what degree of realism is in these transnational soap operas? Additionally, what is meant by *real*, *reality*, and *realism*, especially in soap operas? In this section, I am briefly discussing realism and realism in soap operas.

The birth of realism resulted from an aesthetic movement in the nineteenth century to represent a fair and objective representation of the real world in art, based on a thorough reflection of contemporary life. (McCarthy, 2015). According to Fiske (2010), "realism is not a matter of a fidelity to an empirical reality, but of the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed" (p. 21). Similarly, Ang (1985) asserts, "what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a 'structure of feeling'" (p.45). For Bagman (2009), realism "is not a fixed attribute, but a relationship between text, reality, and audience that changes as does the culture in which it operates" (p. 47).

Moreover, realism in a television programme "is constructed through a range of devices and conventions which derive their significance primarily from generic and textual histories, rather than, from any direct relation with the real" (Brunsdon, 1997, p. 72). What is derived from these definitions is that recreating the *real*, perception, or representation of *reality is realism*. Thus, this *reality* is different for every individual and society.

Fiske (2010) argues that realism is *reactionary*, and it "represents the world in a way that naturalizes status quo" (p. 33). As Fiske (2010) states, realism can be defined by both its content or its form. Defining realism by its content allows an understanding of "what it shows," and defining it by forms illustrates "what it does" (Fiske, 2010, p. 24). Ian Watt (1957) and Raymond Williams (1977) (both cited in Fiske, 2010) define realism by its content. Watt (1957, as cited in Fiske, 2010) believes that realism represents events happening to individuals at a specific time and place,

and it “depends on the belief in an objective reality that can be accurately experienced by human senses” (p. 22). Thus, an individual’s experiences and senses are principal in making sense of the world; events and ideas ought to be illustrated, taking into account individual experiences (Fiske, 2010).

Similarly, Raymond Williams describes realism by three characteristics. First, it displays the action in a contemporary setting; second, it is concerned with human actions (Fiske, 2010), which means it understands action in human terms (Bagman, 2009), and third, it is socially extended (Fiske, 2010), which means it portrays ordinary people and not the *high ranked* or leaders (Bagman, 2009). According to Bagman (2009), these three mentioned characteristics of realism played an essential role in shifting the function of art that included melodrama and realism. According to McCarthy (2015), realism for the study of soap operas content analysis and reception analysis is a useful category. Soap operas, as mentioned earlier, mostly deal with everyday life issues (Geraghty, 1995). Realism in soap operas reflects the contemporary social issues familiar to audiences, especially female audiences, allowing them to connect and associate with plots and characters. Thus, realism is created in several ways, such as settings, events, language, and characters. For instance, British soap operas of the 1980s were successful for their realism and structuring their narratives around social issues (see, e.g., Brunsdon, 1995, 1997; Geraghty, 1995). Brunsdon (1997) affirms that “it is surely the predictable familiarity of the life represented [in soap operas] which pulls us in” (p. 25).

Soap operas are known for portraying family life and problems close to viewers’ everyday life. At times family problems portrayed in soap operas come together, makes them viewed unrealistic. However, Brunsdon (1997) states that this may look unrealistic, but since soap operas show some lifelike scenarios, which become recognizable by the audience. Soap operas establish a

site to get viewers involved with the narratives, issues, problems, and characters in the story that resemble viewers' lives (Brunsdon, 1997); although they may not get emotionally involved with every problem or character, there will be some issues and characters that will establish a connection with viewers.

According to Fiske (2010), realism, is defined by how we make sense of the world; rather, what the *real* is made of. Fiske further (2010) argues that realism reproduces reality and makes sense of it, and for doing so, links all elements in a coherently, making it easily understandable. For instance, a soap opera set in a suburban setting and life has to be displayed so that audience, both living suburban life and those not, can make sense of it. Thus, every element used to display rural life –food, costumes, house décor – should be connected and presented logically and coherently to make sense of every element's presence . Fiske (2010) further asserts that

the way we make sense of a reality text is through the same broad ideological frame as the way we make sense of our social experiences in the industrialized west, and both involve the way we make sense of ourselves, or rather, the way we are made sense of by the discourses. (p. 25)

Thus, it can be argued that making sense of a *reality text*, or in this case, reading a soap opera narrative as *real* and making sense of it depends on our version of reality structured by our social experiences.

Feminists have argued that these dominant social and cultural discourses devalue women and enforce power differences; therefore, they emphasize more *realistic* media representations (Brunsdon, 1997). However, when arguing for a more *realistic* representation, one can question what is *real* or *more realistic* since the notion of *real* is subjective.

Brunsdon (1997) argues that soap operas have two kinds of realism: internal realism and external realism. Internal realism refers to the correspondence of characters to the knowledge and

expectations of viewers, and external realism refers to the content and settings of soap operas, and their similarities to the outside world, such as costumes, sets, and events (Brunsdon, 1997). According to Brunsdon (1997), it is the internal realism of a soap opera that matters more than external realism, contributing to how we make sense of the *real* world. Soap operas mostly rely on already existing discourses in society to represent the *real* world to the viewers, and the representations that they produce also contribute to viewers' understanding of the world (Brunsdon, 1997). Hence, as Brunsdon (1997) also argues, "to call for more realistic female characters involves a rather complicated negotiation of these realisms" (p. 28) because, with the changes in the *real* world, a soap opera's realism will change too to conform with the knowledge of its audiences.

Ang (1985) illustrates in her study of viewers of *Dallas*, an American primetime television soap opera, that viewers in their assessment of a serial drama and its pleasure use a realism framework; thus, they evaluate *Dallas*'s level of *realness*. Although, this sense of reality does not arise from the show's diegetic world – i.e., its settings, characters, and plot – instead, viewers' sense of realism came from the show's depiction of, seemingly, true-to-life situations, which Ang called "emotional realism" (1996, p.45). Hence, a sense of *realness* or *real* does not require literal believability in the plot, character or setting; instead, the reality value comes from the way it is represented (Ang, 1996). McCarthy (2015) argues that "insisting on the specificity of emotional realism and distinguishing different levels of realism that are made possible in serial television is crucial for feminist approaches to study of soap opera as a genre" (p. 78).

Soap opera and social change. Traditionally, soap operas have been designed with an education and information agenda targeting the public both on television and radio (de Block, 2012). Soap operas designed with the agenda to promote social change are also called pro-social or

pro-development soap operas (Nariman, 1993). Pro-social soap opera is a melodramatic serial that is broadcast to entertain and educate viewers (Nariman, 1993). As Rogers and Singhal (1990) argue, entertainment media have a high potential to enlighten audiences on various social issues such as health, environment, family planning, gender equality, and mental health. Such social issues are prevalent all around the globe (Brown & Singhal, 1990). To tackle problems associated with such topics, Brown and Singhal (1990) argue that it is essential to use practical media strategies and a commercial capability that can attract and retain audiences.

Pro-social or pro-development soap operas are aired both through television and radio. For example, since 1959, in Jamaica, pro-social soap opera has been broadcast on radio that deals with different social and development concerns (Brown & Singhal, 1999). Similarly, in Afghanistan, BBC Persian and Pashto broadcast a pro-social soap opera *New Home, New Life – Neway Kor neway Zwand* in Pashto, *Zindagy Naw Khana Naw* in Dari. The radio soap operas educate people on different issues such as protection from mines, supporting and informing police in case of danger, women's equality and treatment of women, family planning, and women and children's health. Likewise, television soap operas have also promoted various educational and development objectives in Latin American countries and other countries, such as China and India (Brown & Singhal, 1999).

Miguel Sabido first initiated employing soap opera for social change in Mexico (Rogers & Antola, 1985). His goal was to use commercial television for social benefits through soap operas that reach people in their homes (Rogers & Antola, 1985). Sabido produced around eleven television soap operas in Latin America from 1967 to 1982, all dealing with significant social problems and issues to foster development in Mexico (Brown & Singhal, 1999). Sabido focused on

adult literacy, family planning, and gender equality in his pro-social programs (Brown & Singhal, 1990).

Despite the tremendous growth of television and entertainment media, less is known about the entertainment television's pro-social outcomes (Brown & Singhal, 1990). Therefore, the media content is often divided into educational and entertainment (Brown & Singhal, 1990), and are usually seen as two distinct areas. However, many educational programs like the American *Sesame Street* for children, *Naway Kor Neway Zwand* in Afghanistan, or *Hum Log* in India are entertainment and educational programs. Brown and Singhal (1990) argue that exposure to even a single pro-social program can generate persistent cognitive and behavioural changes in viewers, demonstrating the significant role of soap operas designed to promote social and development issues and raise awareness. However, soap operas intended solely for entertainment and gratification purposes differ from those designed to promote social change (Brown & Singhal, 1999). Soap operas merely for entertainment purposes are often open-ended that continue for years without a climax or resolution (Brown & Singhal, 1999). While pro-social soap operas are theory-based, they have objectives, beginning, climax, and resolution (Brown & Singhal, 1999).

Pro-social soap operas are being broadcast in different countries. For instance, in the UK in 1950, the *Archers*, a radio soap opera, promoted agricultural knowledge to increase local food production during post-war food shortages (de Block, 2012). Similarly, the Indian soap *Amanat* (Probity/Safekeeping) tells the story of a man who was a single parent of seven daughters and dealt with misogyny against a girl child. The main character, the father of seven daughters, inspired many men in India to take care of their daughters (Khalid & Ahmed, 2014). *Taru*, an Indian radio soap opera, significantly promoted gender equality and increased social capital among different castes (Singhal, Rao, & Pant, 2006).

Similarly, *Hum Log* attracted viewers, particularly on women's equality and freedom in India (Khalid & Ahmed, 2014). In Turkey, the soap opera *Serceleer goc etmez* familiarized women with modern contraceptive methods (Khalid & Ahmed, 2014). In China, the soap opera *Ke Wang* promoted a higher social status for women (Wang & Singhal, 1992).

Soap operas in Afghanistan. In 1993, when half of the Afghans were suffering from the civil war inside the country, and the other half of the population fled to neighbouring countries to seek refuge, BBC World service soap opera with a small group of professional Afghan scriptwriters developed a radio soap opera, *New House New Life*⁴ (Skuse, 2005). Radio soap opera *New House New Life* started when the concept of entertainment was almost nonexistent among Afghans. *New House New Life* radio soap opera continued for 12 years (Skuse, 2005), attracting around 35 million listeners in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Afghan refugees) (The Guardian, n.d.). Since radio was allowed during the Taliban, Afghans living in Afghanistan could listen to the BBC services *New Life New Home* radio soap opera. I was a big admirer of the show. The show was about an Afghan village and its residents and was designed according to Afghan people's culture and traditions.

Today from Latin America to the Far East, soap operas and drama series from around the globe air on Afghan television stations (Osman, 2011). Afghan television stations mostly import soap operas or drama serials from the countries they are produced, such as India, Turkey, Korea, Iran, Japan, and the United States (Osman, 2011). Post-Taliban, the first imported soap operas that gained popularity were from India. Soap operas such as *Kunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Mother-in-law was once daughter-in-law), *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (story of every household), and *KumKum*. I remember these mentioned soap operas were on almost everyone's list that I knew.

⁴ *Nawai Kor Nawai Jwand* in Pashto and *Khana-e-Naw Zindagy-e-Naw* in Dari.

Kyun Ki first aired on Tolo TV in 2005. Tolo dubs the imported soap operas, and it is famous for its quality of dubbing. Indian soap operas resemble the Latin American telenovelas and American soap operas in their melodramatic performances and domestic content and, in terms of stylizations, have more lavish sets and costumes (Osman, 2011).

Afghan television stations air transnational soap operas between 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. that is primetime; and due to the hazardous situation in Afghanistan, most people prefer staying home after work and thus, this is the time slot when most Afghans are home, and television networks can target the whole household (Osman, 2011). Also, most households have electricity during the evenings; therefore, they can turn on their televisions to watch. It is said that most households would not even respond to phone calls when busy watching a soap opera. There was a buzz that a house was robbed when a soap opera was being aired. None of the family members realized their house was being robbed since they were too busy watching their favourite soap opera. It was also rumoured that robbers left a note to the family, stating, “thank you to Tulsi.” Tulsi was the main female character of one of the most popular Indian soap operas. How accurate or untrue this occurrence was is another discussion, but it demonstrates the popularity of soap operas among Afghans.

Similarly, Osman (2011), in her research on television and media in Afghanistan, states that some central authorities, judges, politicians, even warlords would cut their evening prayers short to avoid missing their favourite soap operas. I had an almost similar experience during my research data collection in Kabul. Although my experience is not of authorities, it was more with my family and extended family. For instance, my mother would ask us, “should I prepare the meal?” and before we even responded to her, she said, “let the serial finish then we will prepare and eat.” The soap opera fever was visible among my family too. In a country where entertainment sources,

particularly for women and girls, are so limited, television and televisual soap operas become a medium of pleasure. Osman (2011) also asserts that soap operas in Afghanistan, contrary to western routine, are a source of entertainment and pastime (Osman, 2011).

With the growing popularity of Indian soap operas, religious and tribal authorities' criticisms of them also increased. Religious leaders criticized Indian soap operas for *corrupting* Afghan culture and exerting influence of Hinduism (Osman, 2011). Although religious groups criticized many television programs – singing shows, call-in music shows, and at times news – soap opera has been the center of their disparagement. Soap operas have not only been under attack by religious groups, but some governmental authorities also disapprove of them. For instance, the Afghan parliament announced several bills to ban Indian soap operas from airing on Afghan television channels (Osman, 2011). However, imported Indian soap operas are not only being disapproved for their “Hinduization,” as in Osman’s (2011) terms, they are also contended for *immorality* for their portrayal of issues such as divorce, love affairs, extramarital affairs, and adultery (Osman, 2011). According to BBC (2012), some women groups also criticize Indian soap operas. For instance, a representative of Afghan Women’s Network argues that Indian soap operas’ portrayal of women negatively impacts *modern* women’s perception about since women are frequently portrayed at home, gossiping and plotting, having *illegitimate* births, and disparaging relationships (BBC, 2012).

Additionally, conservative groups argue that such shows can negatively impact Afghan youth and women and that they are vulnerable to following the *inappropriate* lifestyle portrayed in soap operas (Osman, 2011). Such an argument assumes that women and youth are passive receivers of information delivered by television and the media, and women and youth cannot decode media messages differently and critically. Such an assumption also demonstrates that

women are seen as passive beings with a lack of intellectual ability. However, such a simplistic media power model is challenged by reception research (e.g., Ang, 1985; Fiske, 1988; Hall, 1997; Morley, 1992). Likewise, my research findings also emphasize that audiences are not passive receivers; instead, they have a constant back and forth with media messages.

With growing criticism of Indian soap operas, Afghan television stations turned towards Turkish soap operas since Turkey and Afghanistan have a religious similarity. According to *Hürriyet Daily News* (2013), around 200 Turkish television dramas are broadcast on Afghan televisions, and the reason for the growing interest in Turkish dramas among Afghans is the balanced portrayal of modernity and tradition in Turkish soap operas that attracts all classes in Afghan society (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 2013). Despite the portrayal of Islam as the religion in most Turkish soap operas aired on Afghan television channels, they are still criticized, censored, and banned for being *too liberal*. For the imported soap opera content to fit the Afghan culture, they require cutting, dubbing and blurring (Osman, 2011). They are dubbed in local languages, the *inappropriate* scenes are cut, and women's bare body parts are blurred.

Some Afghan private television production houses have attempted to produce television drama series designed and developed in Afghanistan; however, they cannot compete with the quality of production and budget of Turkish and Indian soap operas. The Turkish and Indian soap operas are aired five days a week, while locally produced Afghan television drama series air once a week. Additionally, most of the Afghan-produced television drama series rely on foreign funding, which means if there is funding, the series can continue and, if not, it will stop. Additionally, locally produced drama series cannot be considered soap operas since they are short and wrap up in a few episodes. For instance, Tolo TV developed a crime thriller series *Eagle 4*, funded by the United States (BBC, 2012) and a domestic drama series *Razhay En Khana* (The secrets of this

house), directed by Roya Sadaat, a female Afghan filmmaker. Roya Sadaat recently directed another Afghan television drama series of 13 episodes long, *Khaat Sewom* (the third line) and portrayed young Afghans from diverse cultures and ethnicities with different issues and challenges in life. *Khaat Sewom* gained widespread acclaim, and the roar was visible on social media. It is expected that after the popularity of *Khaat Sewom*'s first season, the production house is now planning for the second season. Afghan dramas might not fit the soap opera genre due to financial constraints, but they are gaining popularity for portraying local issues and lifestyles.

Turkish soap operas. According to Yanardağoğlu and Karam (2013), Turkish drama series are similar to soap operas; they have gained both local and international success (Larochelle, 2019). Turkish television drama exports rose in the mid-2000s and were marketed in many Middle Eastern, Balkans, Central Asian, and Latin American countries (Yesil, 2015). Although the Turkish drama series started moving to other countries in 1997, the breakthrough was in 2008 when the pan-Arab network aired the Turkish soap opera *Noor* in Arabic (Andre, 2017; Rohde, 2017). *Noor* later became a massive hit among Arab audiences, which according to Rohde (2012), drew an estimated 85 million viewers on its final episode. Turkey was an importer of American soap operas and telenovelas (Özalpman, 2017). However, today Turkey is considered one of the largest drama series exporters (Yesil, 2005). According to the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, between 2005 and 2011, around 36,000 hours of Turkish television content were exported to about 76 countries (Yesil, 2005). The export of television dramas became a high revenue source as well for Turkey. According to Dickens (2014), in 2014, Turkey was the second-largest television drama producer worldwide and brought USD 200 million to the Turkish economy.

Along with being a tremendous revenue source, Turkish soap operas also influenced and increased tourist inbounds (Balli, Balli, & Cebeci, 2013; Öztürkmen, 2018). Aksoy and Robins (2000) also assert that one of the objectives of the transnationalization of Turkish media content was to project the Turkish nation's image to the international public and link the Turks living in Europe. Similarly, Larochelle (2019) asserts that the export of Turkish soap operas has contributed to the effort of presenting Turkey as a "model country," particularly as a model for a democratic Muslim country (p. 67). Hence, it can be argued that it is a modelling as well as economic agenda.

Some of the successful exports are *Ishk-i-Memnu* (forbidden love) based on a famous Ottoman novel and *Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne?* (What is Fatmagul's Crime?); both the soap operas were watched in Arab states, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Balkans and Hispanic countries (Andrew, 2017). Yesil (2015) argues that due to Turkish soap operas' tremendous success globally, the producers often target their shows to foreign audiences knowing that a failed show inside can gain success abroad. Additionally, foreign audiences form an *imagined community* by sharing patterns of inspiration and identification (Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013). For instance, Middle Eastern or Afghan female audiences may identify with suppressed female identities portrayed in the Turkish drama series; and take inspiration from active women characters (Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013).

Turkish soap operas or drama series project Turkey's secularist society as a modern but religious (Muslim). Unlike Western soap operas and drama series, Turkish series often display close family relations and values and romance and love stories. Representation in the Turkish soap operas is often based on religious values, respect to the family institution and its patriarchal system, and the nation and the authority (Larochelle, 2019). According to Rohde (2012), "in its soap operas, Turkey is modern, Muslim and prosperous at the same time" (para. 13). Turkish soap

operas' common themes are either forbidden love stories between two people with different social status, or lover stories between two people who face abstruse circumstances due to a third person (Larochelle, 2019).

Furthermore, Turkey's geographical location makes it a cultural bridge between the West and East and the Christian and Muslim worlds (Rusnáková, 2014). Turkish soap operas depict women and men mingling and socializing together while drinking wine and sometimes engaging in extra or premarital sex (Andrew, 2017). However, with the AKP government in place and more strict policies, Muslim women and men's *immoral* representations are banned in the recent soap operas (Larochelle, 2019).

The growing popularity of Turkish dramas is also visible in the context of Afghanistan. The Turkish government and policy analysts embraced the country's expanding soap opera power in the neighbouring regions and explained how the popular appeal of Turkish television dramas was getting a boost from the cultural similarities, historical relationships and/or religious connections between Turkey and the Middle East, Balkans, and Central Asia (Oymen, 2012). Liebes and Katz (1990) assert that there is always a relationship between the universality of themes and particularity of context in transnational soap operas. Thus, Turkish soap operas are not very alien to Afghan audiences since Islam is part of Afghan and Turkish audiences' shared history, and family relationships that are the central component of Turkish soap operas are also a principal value in Afghan people's lives. Turkey is also a Muslim society; their soap operas also present a Muslim society (Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013).

Additionally, the *modernity* displayed in Turkish soap operas is, contrary to Western modernity, more appealing to the Middle East, East and Central Asian societies due to cultural and religious proximity. Furthermore, dubbing the Turkish soap operas into Dari and Pashto languages

likely eliminates the linguistic gap for Afghan audiences. Also, Turkey and Afghanistan relations go back to the Ottoman Empire. Afghanistan was the second country after the Soviet Union that recognized the Turkish republic through the 1921 Treaty of Friendship (Kaura, 2017).

Despite Turkish television dramas' popularity in many countries, there are also oppositional and adverse reactions from both the host country authorities and audiences (Yesil, 2015). In Greece, Turkish soap operas are criticized for *broadcasting invasion* and cultural invasion (yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013). Salamandra (2012), in her analysis of the Turkish drama series *Noor* in the Middle East, states that along with the popularity, *Noor* also arose some backlash. Salamandra (2012) further states that since Turkish soap operas have “invoked binaries of East and West, Islam and secularism, tradition and modernity, patriarchy and feminism, enabling a range of commentary on the state of Arab society in general, and sexual relations in particular” (p. 47). Conversely, Abu Jaafer (2008) states that in the Arab world, Turkish television drama series are often criticized for portraying the contradicted Islamic teachings. Similarly, in Afghanistan, oppositions are displayed by religious groups in the country (Osman, 2019).

Studies on gender and Turkish soap operas reveal that gender stereotypes are prevalent in Turkish soap operas. For instance, Elif Kiran's (2016) article *Gender stereotypes in Turkish soap operas* concludes that women in Turkish soap operas are often represented stereotypically. Kiran (2016) further states, “women are expected to obey the patriarchal [gender system]” (p. 248). Women's identity is often associated with their family – children and husband (Kiran, 2016). Additionally, Mutlu (2013), in the Master thesis on *Women and Tradition in Turkish Television Culture*, describes the term *tradition* and *traditional* in the context of Turkey as “what is in the family” (p. 15). According to Mutlu (2013), the Turkish family is matriarchal, and mothers have high importance for maintaining the household and men – husband, father, son – are breadwinners.

Turkish family system has patterns of a patriarchal, heteronormative family. Turkish men have always been dominant and powerful (Korkmaz, 2015). Although men's positions in Turkish society have remained constant throughout history, women's position has changed with economic structure, secularism, modernization, Islamization, and urbanization (Korkmaz, 2015).

Similarly, Turkish soap operas demonstrate a patriarchal model where the head of the family, who is almost always a male is dominant (Buccianti, 2010). According to Mutlu (2013), Turkish soap operas represent the dominant ideology of gender based on patriarchy. Similarly, Larochelle (2019) states,

In general, the relations between a man and a woman through Turkish soap operas, could be compared to the relation between a father and its child. Men are always represented as calm when an unpleasant event occur, rational, protective and caring. On the other hand, women are presented as hysterical, with irrational/childish behavior and often unable to take care of themselves or making choices. (p. 74)

Mutlu (2013) further adds that although women in the year 2000s appeared in more professional roles in soap operas in Turkey, they remained subject to their traditional roles. It is important to note that with the expansion of Turkish television series around the world, gender roles and family ideas represented in Turkish television drama series are not limited to Turkish society or Turkish households but have reached non-Turkish societies such as Middle East, Central Asia, Latin America, and Europe (Üstek & Alyanak, 2017).

According to Üstek and Alyanak (2017), historically, women in Turkish society are defined by their domestic duties and faithfulness as a wife and mother. Similarly, Hürriyet Daily News (2018) article *Turkish top business body's research finds TV series reinforce gender stereotype* discusses the findings of research on the positioning of women and men in Turkish Television series, conducted by Irem Inceoglu and Elif Akçali. The study illustrates that 80 percent of female characters in Turkish television series and soap operas are portrayed in places other than

work, and 92 percent of scenes that include female characters take place in domestic settings (Hürriyet Daily News, 2018). The study also states that one in three women in the Turkish Television series is married (Hürriyet Daily News, 2018).

On the one hand, Turkish soap operas are criticized for their representations of contradicted Islamic values and stereotypical portrayal of women. On the other hand, Turkish soap operas are also seen as a tool to promote gender equality and raise sensitive social issues on gender and women's rights. Rusnáková (2014) sees Turkish soap operas as *soft power* to empower women. She further argues that "Turkey is one of the most Liberal Islamic country [*sic*] what is [also] reflected in soap operas by its more westernized style of clothing, not wearing headscarves but mostly different [in] thinking about human rights and equality between men and women" (p. 9). Additionally, Rusnáková (2014) asserts that along with so-called *Western* modernity, Turkish soap operas also portray traditional Islamic culture that can appeal to Islamic countries and open a window to present sensitive and controversial issues in the frame of soap operas.

Feminist Reception Analysis

Reception analysis is a reaction to the earlier models of media studies that were mainly directed to the media's influence and effect studies (Dhoest, 2015). Reception analysis as a type of qualitative audience research aims to combine social science and humanistic approaches (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). Ang (1995) defines reception analysis as "the [way] in which people actively and creatively make their meanings and create their own culture, rather than passively absorb pre-given meanings imposed upon them" (p. 136). The shift to study the audience as active viewers initiated the bottom-up studies that focused on audiences' agency and freedom and challenged the idea of assuming media audiences as merely passive consumers (Ang, 1990). Also, reception analysis challenged the "textualism" (p. 79) that read the meaning and ideological effects from

texts without considering the interdiscursive context of the reader (Dhoest, 2015). Reception analysis, further, rejects the notions of powerful text and passive readers and vice versa (Pitout, 1998). However, as Livingstone (2003) asserts, it is not meant that the media do not have any influence on society, but rather the influence is indirect and more complex than assumed.

Additionally, van Zoonen (1994) claims that during the 1980s, the interest in studying media audience increased due to limitations of the content analysis, semiotic analysis, and psychoanalytic approaches. The focus shifted to understanding how non-academic readers read television and media texts, which meant moving from textual analysis solely towards qualitative audience research – reception analysis (Brunsdon, 1991). Fiske (1987) argues that media texts are polysemic – i.e., they have more than one meaning. Therefore, it is crucial to study the audience to understand how they make meaning of television programmes in their everyday life setting (Livingstone, 2003).

The previous models of media studies located the meaning in the media text, whereas the new models that emphasize the audience argue that there is a constant negotiation between the media and audience in constructing of meanings. By shifting the focus from merely the text, to the audience, the focus also shifted to the context and social analysis (Livingstone, 2003). The context of using text, the text itself, and how media texts are made meaningful are three critical components of reception research (Hermes, 2003). Reception studies criticize “the notion of the ideal reader as ahistorical” and aims to discuss “real audience” feedback “in contextual and situated ways” (Hermes, 2003, p. 73). Therefore, it is important to focus on comprehending how audiences understand media texts and messages instead of discussing and generalizing the assumption of how individuals might have or may understand media texts (Hermes, 2003; Hole & Jelača, 2018).

Likewise, Livingstone (2003) emphasizes the importance of social context in audience interpretation and asserts that:

Audience interpretations or decoding have been found to differ depending on viewers' socioeconomic position, gender, ethnicity, and so forth, while the possibilities for critical or oppositional readings are anticipated, enabled or restricted by the degree of closure semiotically encoded into the text and by audiences' variable access to symbolic resources. (p. 343)

Similarly, since people's history and culture play a vital role in the way they interpret and appropriate messages, Thompson (1990) also argues that their historical and cultural situation should be taken into account in studying viewers' reception and interpretation.

In the reception analysis, the process of use, negotiation, interpretation, and accommodation is vital to the audiences' interaction with media texts (van Zoonen, 1994). Everyday life is core in the process of meanings and definitions; and it is the everyday experiences that gets audiences involved with the media and communication technologies (Cavalcante et al., 2017). Thus, setting reception analysis within more extensive sociocultural contexts allows audience researchers to look at the broader questions of identity, participation, politics, and power by exploring how people make sense of the media texts in their daily lives (Livingstone & Das, 2013). Therefore, television is traditionally linked to audience and reception studies since it is seen as a domestic form of entertainment and part of audiences' everyday lives (Hole & Jelača, 2018).

Hermes (2014) believes that "qualitative audience studies have arguably been the best possible expression of feminist engagement in media studies" (p. 61). According to Hermes (2003),

[V]alue for feminism has been to provide an empirical means to question established notions of femininity and masculinity and to provide new theorizations for gender. Its value for media and

cultural studies is perhaps usefully understood in contrast to what could be called its academic adversary, textual analysis. (p. 382)

It is essential to mention that feminist media studies using content analysis, semiotic analysis, and psychoanalysis approaches have been significant in studying media. For instance, Tuchman's (1978) *Symbolic Annihilation* using content analysis asserts that the absence of images of working women in television can distress their presence in the workforce and labour market. Similarly, Mulvey's study of the male gaze based on the psychoanalysis approach contends that textual mechanisms place Hollywood movies' audience in a *male voyeur* position and objectify female bodies (van Zoonen, 1994). Moreover, McRobbie's (1982) study of a British teenage magazine called Jackie used semiology to analyze Jackie's visual and verbal signs.

While all the mentioned studies focused on the audience, audiences' perspectives were absent with assumptions that media deliver content in the same way to everyone, and audiences are passive consumers. The necessity to focus on audience interpretations was lacking. Lewis (1991) asserts that if the concern is meaning, the significance of popular culture in society, and how cultural products or texts work ideologically and politically, it is essential to understand cultural products or texts from the audience perspective; and such an understanding cannot be reached merely with textual (content) analysis. Similarly, Geraghty (1998) states, "if we want to find out about the audience, why not ask them?" (p. 143). Likewise, Morley (1991) states:

Should you wish to understand what I am doing, it would probably be best to ask me. I may well, of course, lie to you or otherwise misrepresent my thoughts or feelings, for any number of purposes, but at least, through my verbal responses, you will begin to get some access to the kind of language, criteria of distinction and types of characterizations, through which I construct my (conscious) world. (p. 25)

Radway's (1984) classic study *Reading the Romance* and Ang's (1985) study of *Watching Dallas* can be emphasized as the first feminist reception studies. In her study, *Reading the Romance*, Radway (1984) discusses how women interpret romantic novels and combine textual and audience research. Radway's analysis of reading romance novels' pleasures challenges concepts of readers and audiences of popular culture being loaded by "false consciousness" that was common in early feminist media studies (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 111). As a Marxist term, false consciousness, argues that since dominant ideology serves the interest of dominant and ruling class have programmed the society and people, it is often difficult for people to recognize what is for the best of their interest (Hermes, 2010).

Similarly, Ang (1985), in her study *Watching Dallas*, asks, "how must the fact that so many women obviously get pleasure from watching soap operas be judged politically from a feminist perspective? Is Dallas good or bad for women?" (p. 118). Likewise, van Zoonen (1994) argues that it is not only essential to understand why women watch soap operas and how they decode them "but also whether and how the construction of meaning through interaction between text and audience contributes to the subversion, negotiation or maintenance of hegemonic gender discourse" (p. 117). The Nationwide study by Morley (1980) also played a vital role in feminist reception (audience) research.

Research into soap opera and audience allowed to study consumption and reception of a genre central to women's everyday life and make previously overlooked topics critical objects of study (Buonanno, 2014). Byerly (2016) asserts that audience research has contributed to understanding how women interrelate with media texts. For instance, Hobson (1990) studied soap opera and British working women as audiences. In her study, Hobson (1990) focused on understanding how watching soap operas contribute to the interpersonal relations and workplace

culture of British working women. Hobson (1990) states, “one of the fallacious myths to have grown up about watching television is that of passive viewer” (p. 162). According to Hobson (1982), the soap operas’ analysis and critiques begin as viewers start watching soap operas and continues through their discussions about them. Thus, viewers do not accept everything shown to them; instead, they criticize the soap operas and their contents (Hobson, 1990). Furthermore, viewers assess of the validity of what happens in a soap opera and compare it with what they believe could have happened, presenting their version of *if they were in the same position* (Hobson, 1990).

Audience studies mostly involve ethnographic techniques such as interviews and participant-observation (Byerly, 2016). During the 1980s and 1990s, cultural studies, especially feminist traditions and ethnographic methods, supported the contextualization of interpretative work within relations of structure and power (Livingstone & Das, 2013). The feminist critique of male-dominant science motivated the feminist audience research that worked to include women’s genres (genres that interested women audiences) as academic considerations and “women as the main group of informants” (Hermes, 2014, p. 63). Initially, the empirical efforts were strongly sociological and socio-psychological and later, the efforts were also influenced by anthropological approaches and required the development of new methods of studying within the private world of the audience (Livingstone & Das, 2013). Understanding the audience as active meaning-makers revises the power relationship of viewing and allows the audience some agency in the process (Lotz, 2000).

Feminist audience research focused on when and how gender is used as a disciplining act (Hermes, 2014). Lotz (2000) states, “the subject of qualitative audience studies is not the audience, but a specific, highly contextualized audience” (p. 449), and therefore, do not demand claims of

generalization, instead presents a profound understanding of a unique or limited case study (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Lotz, 2000). Likewise, Hermes (2014) states, “the project of media and gender research from an audience research perspective has to do with understanding, not with the prescription of finding fault” (p. 67).

In the 21st century, new questions are being raised around gender and audience since “the broadcast logic of mass media production and consumption that defined the audience as the end station of communication process is no longer to be all-powerful, as it was widely regarded in media research several decades ago” (Hermes, 2014, p. 67). Thus, Hermes (2014) asks “can ethnographic perspective of yesterday still help us to understand gender and gendered identities in relation to the logics of both broadcast and multi-platform media” (p. 67). Hermes (2014) suggests that the ethnographic approach should be reconsidered to include new media landscapes and argues that by widening the scope of research methodology, a deeper understanding of how, where, and why audience members follow traditional gender roles – if they do – can be reached.

Cavalcante et al. (2017) assert that feminist media reception studies have become less visible. Similarly, Hermes (2014) stresses that after the studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, audience studies have become less innovative and critical. The purpose of reception studies today, argues Das (2017),

Perhaps is to treat interpretive practices as material to be deeply understood for studies of media cultures and mediation rather than concluding prematurely, and form a very Western lens, that audience have revealed all they had to, and the field is indeed ready to move on. (p. 269)

Similarly, Parameswara (2003) also asserts that the studies produced in the 1980s and 1990s have mostly analyzed white, middle-class, and Western women’s interaction with popular culture (e.g., Ang, 1985; Brunson, 1981; McRobbie, 1990; Rawday, 1984).

The literature reviewed here also demonstrated that most of the work on feminist reception/audience research had been conducted mostly by white, middle-class, Western feminists. However, not overlooking some of Middle Eastern and Black feminists' critical work, audience research by and particularly about non-Western women and women of color is still low in number (Parameswara, 2003). Although the focus has moved from the passive to active audience and consumption and interpretations of cultural texts by some women, other women's interpretations are left out (Valdivia, 2000). In Afghanistan's case, it is safe to say we do not know much about Afghan audiences, particularly female audiences, and their interpretations and viewing positions. Thus, Valdivia (2000) argues for a multicultural vision to go beyond the racial binary of white and Black women only and include diverse women's popular culture experiences.

By including and recording postcolonial feminist media reception/audience research, alternative knowledge of non-Western is generated that revise, revisit, and further complicate early narratives (Parameswara, 2003). Parameswara (2003) maintains that while postcolonial feminists in audience studies have just begun to record non-Western women and other groups' experiences of popular culture, media studies suggest wrapping up and announcing the audience's end as an object of study. Similarly, Shohat and Stam (2014) also argue that when dominant Europe announces the *end* of metanarratives, one must ask who's narrative and history is announced as an *end*; people of color, *third world*/Global South, women, gays and lesbians, have just started telling their stories their way. Parameswara (2003) further suggests that before feminist media critics in the *First World*, as she terms, start to argue for the wrap up of audience research and move towards other objects of study, they must reflect on whose voices and experience are recorded and whose voices are missing. As Shome (2016) asserts, "there seems to be a lack of recognition or discussion evinced in dominant media studies (especially in the West) that millions of people in various parts

of the non-Western world fall out of *the history* of media (and its functioning and assumptions) that we narrate in the West” (p. 246 Italics in original). The audience studies might be in its endpoint in the Global North; however, it is still an area to be explored in other regions of the world. One of the current study’s contributions is adding another perspective and more voices to feminist media studies by studying Afghan audiences, particularly Afghan female audiences, an under-researched population in feminist media studies.

Chapter Three

Theoretical Framework

The notions of images, meanings, and representations have been vital in feminist media studies. As discussed in the previous chapter, feminist media theory aims to understand how images and language define or restrain women. The main objectives of feminist media studies are to examine representations of gender relations, audiences' interpretations of those representations, and media experts' contribution to disseminating sexual inequalities (Mendes & Carter, 2008). Feminist media studies focus mainly on how gender is communicated within the media (van Zoonen, 1994).

Media Representations

The concept of representation is vital in the media studies particularly in television studies (Casey et al., 2008). The study of representation is linked with the construction of meaning (Kidd, 2016). Stuart Hall's contribution to understanding representations in media has been significant. Hall has critically looked at how media manufacture and reinforce social inequalities through stereotyping and how those representations can be challenged and resisted. Media reflects the world around us; however, what is being reflected is not accurate but a version of reality (Dixon, 2020). Kidd (2016) argues that studying representation is vital since media and culture shape our view of the world. She further states,

Media representations are a cultural issue, but they also have huge political, historical and social repercussions. Their study has been seen as important as a way of highlighting and beginning to address imbalances in the cultural and media representations on offer within societies. (p.10)

Based on the idea that representations matter, feminist research on media aims to “understand how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination, and oppression” (Gill, 2007, p.7). In the Western context, representations of race, class, age, gender,

(dis)ability, and sexuality in media have been problematic since the *other* is often defined based on white, middle-class, heteronormative, males' characteristics (Kidd, 2016).

For instance, the media represent female politicians incongruent with gender roles and place more focus on their appearance, domestic, and personal issues than their political activities (Gallagher, 2005). Similarly, women are rarely represented by their profession – *politicians* – but by their gender (Gallagher, 2005). A similar pattern seems to be visible in every medium and genre.

Consequently, women are still portrayed in less diverse roles in the popular media that have very little to no resemblance to ordinary women and their lives (Byerly & Ross, 2006).

The politics of representation is of significant interest in studies of women's representations in the media (Panitchpakdi, 2007). Since the 1970s, women's representations in the media have been a crucial part of feminist research; as Byerly (2012) states, it was “objectionable content [that] motivated grassroots women's groups to protest and take action several decades ago” (p. 5). Most research on women's representations in the media focuses on stereotypical images of women that have saturated the popular culture for decades (Byerly, 2012).

Webb (2009) argues that the media assert to be a window into the world presenting things as they are, and television, in particular, is seen as a significant social site where vital issues can be presented and discussed. Similarly, Bourdieu (1977) claims that mass media present dominant and mainstream perspectives as *the true* and *acceptable*. For Webb (2009), mass media are a “field with huge signifying power” (p. 107). Webb (2009) further states that mass media have an enormous reach – being it through television, radio, print magazines and newspapers, films, movies, games, and the online world; they are almost everywhere in our lives by repeating stories and ideas and making them seem like *truth* and *reality*. Webb (2009) believes that “cultural industries are very important in the production and institution of ideologies because it is the

signifying, or symbolic, systems that provide us with the means for understanding the world, and the media by which we communicate these understandings and their meaning” (p. 114). Webb (2009), assuming the prominence of the cultural industries in diffusing ideas, further asserts that the cultural industries, largely, support ideas and ideologies that are of interests to the dominating class in the discourses, by not imposing ideas on people, but rather presenting a minimal range of possible ideas.

In this section, I discuss the concept of representations, media representations, stereotyping, and censorship as types of representations in the media.

Most of the disciplines apply the concept of representation to study underlying meanings embedded in texts (Webb, 2009); similarly, gender representations look at the process of meaning – making of gender ideology in cultural discourses. Additionally, representation is involved in social construction, identity formation (Pollack, 1996; Woodward, 1997), and stereotyping (Hall, 1997). Hall (1977) defines representation as “an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (p. 15). For Hall (1997), meaning and language are connected to culture through representations. Hall (1997) identifies two systems of representation. First, the system that connects all sort of objects, people, and events to a set of concepts or a conceptual maps in our minds; and second, the language that connects our conceptual maps to a set of signs to represent those concepts, and it is the language – verbal and non-verbal – images, and other ways of communication through which we make sense of the world (Hall, 1997).

Media representation discusses how media (e.g., television, news, radio, print media, and internet) represent or portray certain groups and communities. Stewart and Kowaltzke (2007) argue that “media do not present reality – they *represent* it by offering a selection of reality” (p.

35, italics in original). Representations are not reality (Croteau & Hoynes, 2014) but they narrate our social world in meaningful ways (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015). Similarly, media products are not the same as humans' lived experiences but rather selected constructed ideas (Stewart & Kowaltzke, 2007). Likewise, Webb (2009) illustrates Theodor Adorno's (1991) argument that mass media do not force or convince viewers to accept ideologies or ideas but rather present a limited range of ideas and ideologies. The media represent ideas in a way and too often as the *only reality* and do not allow other ways of understanding *reality*.

Feminist media studies have mostly focused on understanding the connection between images and cultural constructions to inequality, dominance, and oppression (Gill, 2007). During the 1970s, feminist activists demanded an increase in women's representations in government and private sectors and challenged women's objectification and sexualization in popular culture (Disch, 2015). Since then, feminists focused on understanding how women's images can impact their political actions, participation, an equal practice of rights, and empowerment; and criticized the politics of aesthetic and semiotic representations for the ways women are spoken about and portrayed, and the consequences they may have (Disch, 2015).

During the 1970s, debates on the politics of representation were crucial for feminists as during this time, woman's sexualized representations were very much visible in films, advertisements, beauty contests; while educated and accomplished women hardly made their way into areas such as politics, corporate world, or the Arts (Disch, 2015). These initial critics of women's representations were mostly centred on the notion of *realistic*, which was questioned by psychoanalysis and semiotic theories arguing that,

[R]epresentations do not stand on a mimetic or imitative relationship to reality but, rather, participate in a system of signification whose various elements derive their meaning from what

they are articulated or positioned in relation to, not from what they stand for. (Disch, 2015, p. 783)

After the decades of feminist movements challenging women's representations in the media, today more than 30 percent of women in advertisements are depicted within the constructed beauty standards, i.e., slim, blond, passive, and sex objects (Stewart & Kowaltzke, 2007). Similarly, Stevens and Ostberg (2011), in their study of representations of masculinity and femininity in advertisements argue that advertisements, repeatedly present us with stereotypical representations of women and men, stressing on how men and women are supposed to be. They further argue that such representations, over time, might appear as natural and self-evident (Stevens & Ostberg, 2011).

Since my study focuses on textual (content) and reception (audiences) analysis, I discuss the literature on the media representations focusing on the two perspectives discussed above. Textual (content) analysis centres on issues of invisibility (symbolic annihilation) and stereotyping, and reception (audience) analysis focuses on the importance of media images to viewers (Shaw, 2010). Invisibility or underrepresentation and stereotyping illustrate how the media underrepresent a group, and if representing them, the representation turns into, as Hall (1993) puts, "a kind of carefully regulated segregate visibility" (p. 107), which results in stereotyping.

It is often argued that media representations shape social reality. For example, Davis and Gandy (1999) assert that "media representations play an important role in informing the way in which we understand social, cultural, ethnic, and racial differences" (p. 367). Similarly, D'Acci (2004) on gender representations states that "television representations of gender have very profound effects on very real human bodies, societies, and economics" (p. 376). Dyer (2002) asserts that "how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation" (p.1). Thus, what is being shown or

said, from what perspective; for what specific and hidden outcomes; and what effects they might have on viewers and society? All these issues are closely linked to representation.

Stereotyping and censorship, as kinds of representation, are briefly discussed here.

Historically women have been portrayed stereotypically in the media, and gender relations are also based on traditional and stereotypical depictions (see, e.g., Brown, 1994; Brunson, 2000; Hill, 200; Hobson, 1991; Modleski, 1979). Also, since the study data retrieved some censorship topics in representations of women in the analyzed transnational Turkish soap operas, it is deemed crucial to discuss both stereotyping and censorship.

Stereotype as representation. Stereotypes, according to Ligaga (2019), are essential “for identifying how popular cultural texts work” (p. 59). Stereotype, as Dyer (2009) refers to, is “a term of abuse” (p. 206). The term stereotype is derived from two Ancient Greek words, *Stereo*, which means firm and *typos*, which means impression (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015). Walter Lippmann developed the concept of stereotype to explain how people make sense of mediated messages and how they are influenced by those messages (1922, as cited in Kidd, 2016).

According to Lipmann, humans develop stereotypes to help themselves make sense of the world (as cited in Dyer, 2009), which makes it “a neutral system of classification” (Kidd, 2016, p. 26).

However, today stereotypes are seen as negative connotations that portray a culture or a group negatively. There are several definitions for stereotyping; however, the general idea is that stereotypes are “the traits that we view as characteristics of social groups, or of individual members of those groups, and particularly those that differentiate groups from each other” (Stangor, 2016, p. 4).

Conceptualizing of stereotyping is classified into three approaches – psychodynamic, sociocultural, and cognitive approach – defined by Ashmore and Del Boca (1981 as cited in

Hamilton & Sherman, 1994). The psychodynamic approach discusses the “psychological benefits that can lead to and perpetuate the use of stereotypes;” sociocultural approach focuses on “how stereotypes and prejudice can be learned and perpetuated through socialization experiences, peer group influence, and media portrayals;” and cognitive approach sees stereotypes as cognitive structures and explores “how those structures arise and how their influence on information processing affects perceptions of and interactions with member of stereotyped groups” (p. 2).

According to Stangor (2016), stereotypes matter because they influence our behaviour and our language towards others. Stereotyping reduces groups or group members to some simple and essential characteristics that are deemed natural (Hall, 1997). In this process of simplifying characteristics, we overlook and discard other individualities and construct inaccurate, negative, and essential identities. O’Sullivan et al. (as cited in Casey et al., 2008) affirm that stereotypes resist change and carry a judgemental and narrow range of meanings. Stereotypical representations can cause harm by reducing an individual or a group’s identity to specific ideas and characteristics. It is also important to emphasize that stereotypes are fluid and change across social contexts (Stangor, 2016). One can ask how stereotypes are developed. According to Hamilton and Sherman (1994), “any process that contributes to the differentiation between groups constitutes a potential basis for the formation of stereotypes” (p. 4).

Cultural and media studies and social psychology are the two fields that have dominantly studied stereotypes. The social psychology looks at individual psychic of “constructing, holding, and operating with stereotypes” (Blum, 2004, p. 252). Cultural and media studies explore the content of culturally prominent stereotypes of particular groups – gender, racial, class, – the process of their constructions and dissemination – historically and socially – and the social meanings they deliver (Blum, 2004). Furthermore, stereotypes are linked to prejudices; thus, pre-

emptive discrimination may occur because group members are channelled towards roles that appear to be congruous with their group's stereotypical traits" (Eagly & Diekmann, 2005, pp. 26-27).

Gender stereotypes. United Nations' Human Rights office defines gender stereotypes as generalized and prejudiced views about characteristics, roles, and attitudes of members of a group. Gender stereotypes are visible everywhere, particularly in the media. Gender stereotypes can be classified into two categories – descriptive and prescriptive (Koenig, 2018). Descriptive gender stereotypes are beliefs about what a woman and man usually do, and prescriptive gender stereotypes are beliefs about what a woman and man should do (Koenig, 2018). For instance, when women are only and usually represented as caregivers and homemakers, their identity is reduced to only these characteristics. Descriptively women are expected to be nurturers, and prescriptively they ought to have a warmth and caring nature. Such representations can affect women's status in society by making them seen as caretakers only, ignoring that they can also be/are leaders, lawyers, doctors, judges, and professionals. As Blum (2004) quotes Lippmann, "in the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture" (p. 255). Thus, stereotypes, in this case, are more often inaccurate and construct simplistic generalization about a group (Casey et al., 2008) and see members of a group from a narrow lens that ignores the diversity among them and do not see them as individuals (Blum, 2004).

According to social psychologists, gender stereotypes in media are often seen as "a type of schema involved in processing televised information and in organizing memory" (Martin & Halverson, 1981 as cited in Fung & Ma, 2000. p. 61). Many media and television scholars (e.g., Gunter, 1995) argues that television constructs and perpetuates stereotypes of gender, race, class,

sexuality, (dis)ability in different genres such as comedy, soap operas, advertisements, and films (Casey et al. 2008). Often when stereotypical portrayal occurs alongside the lack of representation, it leads to self-stereotyping, and members of the stereotyped groups attempt to fit into a narrow set of roles and less likely explore other options available (Kidd, 2016). For instance, Ertl, Luttenberger, and Paechter (2017) argue that stereotypically classifying professions can have substantial implications for women, impair learning and prevent women from achieving their full potential. Similarly, according to Stangor (2016), when marginalized groups internalize and accept the stereotypical beliefs about themselves and their groups, it becomes difficult to overcome them. When women do not see themselves represented and reflected in the media or figures like themselves being successful professionals or having healthy relationships can construct barriers for fitting into the larger society (Kidd, 2016).

Additionally, Hamilton and Sherman (1994) assert that stereotypes can play a role in the process of interpretation. For instance, if a woman behaves assertively, she might be judged differently from a man since assertiveness is understood as a masculine trait. Kidd further asserts that for dominant groups to understand marginalized groups and marginalized groups not to be discriminated against, diverse and accurate representation in the media is significantly essential (2016) and not merely tokenism. Similarly, Cooke-Jackson and Hansen (2008) state, “creators of both fiction and nonfiction works have an ethical duty to the individuals they portray, the larger subculture they represent, and the consumers who view their work. This responsibility is not mitigated by the usefulness of stereotype” (p. 194). Additionally, diversity in media representations is the producers’ and practitioners’ social responsibility and not the result of audiences’ demand (Shaw, 2010).

While stereotypes are often misleading and malicious, they also sometimes have a grain of truth (Blum, 2004). Nevertheless, what do we mean by a grain of truth or some truth? For example, if it is argued that women are overemotional and sensitive, it overlooks the fact that women are more often socialized that way. Similarly, in their study Dasgupta and Asgari (2004) explore whether counter-stereotypes can challenge people's stereotypical beliefs about a group. Counter-stereotype portrays a group deliberately to change and challenge earlier representations (Stewart & Kowaltzke, 2007). Dasgupta and Asgari (2004) found that portraying women counter-stereotypically as leaders and in high positions can change their stereotypical beliefs about themselves. However, women's representations, counter-stereotype can be criticized for developing a *superwoman* image ignoring social barriers, limitations, and burdens women face in society. On the contrary, the emphasis should be on more diverse representations rather than *good* or *bad* and *real* or *unreal* representations. While stereotypes often present negative or monolithic representations of a group or community, ignoring the other aspects, censorship too, either hides or eliminates certain groups' representations.

Censorship as representation. Kuhn (2016) defines censorship as “an act of prohibition, exclusion, or cutting-out” (p. 2). According to O'Sullivan et al. (1994), censorship is a process that involves regulating, blocking, and manipulating messages either in part or entirely. Censorship can be seen as a multifaceted phenomenon; it can be problematic and crucial at times. Censorship can be used in various ways to control a group/population, prevent the dissemination of specific ideas, or prevent harm to an individual or a group (Webb, 2009) and most often employed by governments or religious fanatics (Gallagher, 2015) on the grounds of religious, cultural, and moral values. Censorship on the grounds of religion, culture, and moral values is implemented in

many states. For instance, the Iran film industry follows a strict censorship law where if a woman is portrayed dressed *like* men, it ought to be censored (Shakil, 2009).

Webb (2009) argues that censorship is “the issue of the politics of representation: the idea that representations can cause real harm” (p. 114). Bowler (2002, as cited in Webb, 2009) explains this harm in three ways: “by risking personal damage to the individual representation; by risking damage by association to the whole class of persons represented; and by risking damage to the person who looks at the image or reads the description” (p. 115).

Gender-based censorship, as a form of censorship, focuses on censoring issues related to gender. According to Gallagher (2015), gender-based censorship is,

[E]mbedded in a range of social mechanisms that silence women’s voices, deny the validity of their experiences, and exclude them from political discourse. Its effect is to prevent women from exercising their human rights, including their right to freedom of expression. (p. 2)

Gender-based censorship is seen almost in every sphere, such as politics, economy, and education, by excluding or limiting women’s and girls’ access and presence. In the media, gender-based censorship excludes, silences, and alters women’s experiences and controls, dis-empowers, and renders their presence.

Encoding and Decoding

As discussed in detail in the previous chapter, early media studies mainly focused on the media text to study its effects on the audience, ignoring audiences’ participation in the process of meaning-making as active viewers. However, feminist reception studies challenge the notion of passive audience and argue that audiences are actively engaged in the process of meaning-making. In this study, I focus on how viewers interpret gender relations in transnational Turkish soap operas on Afghan television stations to understand the representations from audiences’ perception. As such, feminist reception analysis, as one of the guiding theories for the study, allows analyzing

how participants of the study understand soap opera texts and messages in terms of representations of gender relations, rather than assuming how they might understand texts (Hermes, 2003; Hole & Jelača, 2018).

As mentioned earlier, the study is also looking at the content of transnational Turkish soap operas. The purpose of looking at the content of soap operas is not to study the effects but rather to provide a comprehensive overview of the content of the analyzed transnational soap operas for the study and understand how gender relations are represented and portrayed.

The purpose of studying both the content and reception is to provide a holistic picture to readers. Focusing merely on content could overlook the audiences' perceptions and present only the researcher's viewpoint. Thus, by focusing on both content and reception, through this research, I want to present comprehensively both the perspectives, avoiding one-sided viewpoint as much as possible.

Similarly, Wilson (1993) emphasizes that text and reader are not two separate components and should not be studied separately. Likewise, Bobo (1995) argues that there should be a close reading of text along with audience reception studies. Bobo (1995) further asserts that relying overly on audience responses of media texts can hold judgement of the text that can ignore the text's ideology and deal merely with audience reception of the text. Such an approach can overlook "detrimental films and television programmes because of an unsubstantiated belief that audiences are astute enough to circumvent the harmful meanings of any text" (Bobo, 1995, p. 23). Therefore, Bobo (1995) believes that there is a possibility to have a more comprehensive theoretical balance for audience and text research. In detail in the methodology chapter, the transnational Turkish soap operas' content is analyzed using qualitative content analysis through the feminist media theory lens.

Through this study, I am presenting participants' perspectives and interpretations of the representations of gender relations in transnational Turkish soap operas and my perspective by analyzing the content of two transnational Turkish soap operas. By doing so, I acknowledge that my interpretations of soap operas' content concerning representations of gender relations are likely different from the participants of the study in some ways and often contradictory in other ways. As such, as the researcher, I aim to eliminate the power dynamic between researcher and researched by also being a participant in the research and presenting my subjective position.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model was influential in stimulating new to understand how the audience makes sense of the media text (Gorton, 2009). This model did not only shift the discussion from passive to active viewers but also challenged the notions of passive female viewers and that women internalize gender inequality and objectification portrayed in the media (Watkins & Emerson, 2000).

I am applying the encoding/decoding model to perform reception (audience) analysis and understand participants' interpretations and perceptions of gender relations portrayed in transnational soap operas on the Afghan television stations.

The primary audience research drew on the encoding/decoding model developed by the University of Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies under the direction of Stuart Hall (Bobo, 2004). The encoding/decoding model is a significant early example of reception studies. The model studies how meaning is produced in a specific setting by exploring ideological and cultural power (Bobo, 2004). The encoding/decoding model asserts that television content has meanings at different moments: production (encoding) and reception (decoding) (Hermes, 2010). For Hall (1980), to encode an event, it should be turned into an audio-visual format of television and structured as a story with a specific meaning, and audience members actively decode the

meaning upon reception (Hall, 1980). Both the moments – production and reception – produce different meanings, and there is “no necessary correspondence” (Hall, 1980, p.125). Encoding and decoding are not perfectly symmetrical; what is encoded may not be decoded in the same way. According to van Zoonen (1994), in the encoding/decoding model, media discourse ought not to be “an activity of single institutions or individuals but as a social process embedded in existing power and discursive formations” (p. 8) and thus, assumed to be produced at the same time by media institutions and audiences.

Hall (1980) identifies three viewing positions in the decoding process: dominant or hegemonic, oppositional, and negotiated. To explain the three viewing positions described by Hall (1980), I am bringing examples from the analyzed transnational soap operas in the current study. The dominant or hegemonic position refers to viewer’s position following the text’s preferred reading (Hall, 1980) or the encoded meaning. According to Fiske and Hartley (1978, as cited in Worden, 2013), preferred reading is generally the hegemony and power elite’s viewpoint. In a male-dominated society, the hegemonic viewpoint is often a male viewpoint, and power elites are men. For this study, I am using Fiske and Hartley’s definition of preferred reading.

For instance, the viewer watches a soap opera episode and decodes the meaning as it is encoded, which according to Hall, means the viewer is “*operating inside the dominant code*” (1980, p. 126, emphasis in original). I am bringing an example from one of the episodes I watch for the study. The episode illustrated the main female lead is getting married to a man she does not love and does not want to live with, but she is marrying him only to adopt her siblings and protect them. The female lead demonstrates characteristics such as caring for others before herself and sacrificing her happiness for others, the characteristics often associated with femininity and women. The mentioned characteristics are portrayed as natural, inevitable, and usual among

women. The viewer decodes the text as encoded and agrees that all women are caring, and they think and care for others before themselves.

The second viewing position is the negotiated position where the viewer does not fully accept or reject the preferred reading of encoded meaning (Hall, 1980). For instance, the viewer understands the dominant definition, or hegemonic viewpoint in the media text and accepts it and opposes some of its elements. For example, although the viewer accepts the hegemonic viewpoint that the above-mentioned specific characteristics are socially associated with women and femininity, the viewer her/himself will operate differently in a similar situation in ordinary life, reflecting her/his interests, position, and experience (Hall, 1980).

Lastly, in the oppositional position viewer rejects and resists the preferred reading (Hall, 1980). In the oppositional position, similar to the negotiated position, the viewer understands the dominant or hegemonic viewpoint encoded in the text; however, it decodes the text in a contrary way (Hall, 1980). Analyzing the same example again, the viewer may understand the encoded message, which illustrates that women are kind and sacrificing. These are considered natural characteristics of women but read the text in a contrary way, for instance, as stereotypical, sexist, and problematic representations of women. Hall drew the three viewing positions from Frank Parkin's class inequality and political order (Morley & Brunson, 1999). Zaslow (2012) argues that "while each of these reading positions are possible, polysemy does not suggest that all reading positions are equally likely to be inhabited nor that every reading is equally valid" (p. 194).

Studies such as Morley's *The Nationwide* is also based on the encoding/decoding model. Morley (1980) interpreted the interviews he conducted for the study through the encoding/decoding model that challenged the notion of textual determination. Morley's audience reception study of *The Nationwide* supports the three decoding positions. Morley and Brunson

(1999) argue that these three decoding positions are closely related to the audience's social class. Morley (1980) states, "it is always a question of how social position plus particular discourse positions produce specific readings; readings which are structured because the structure of access to different discourses is determined by social position" (p. 134).

Similarly, Bobo's work on *The Color Purple* film's reception by Black female viewers is based on the encoding/decoding model. Some criticized *The Color Purple* movie, directed by Steven Spielberg, depict a Southern black community (Bobo, 2004). Critics found the Black community's depiction as overly pessimistic and stereotypical (Hole & Jelača, 2018). Bobo, in her study of *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) analyzed how black women as audience members "[create] meaning from mainstream text and uses the reconstructed meaning to empower themselves and their social group" (Bobo, 2004, p. 179). Bobo (2004) found that her study participants were not passive receivers and that black women's positive reception of *The Color Purple*, despite the criticism of the movie by black critics, does not mean they are internalizing the negative stereotypes depicted by false consciousness. The encoding/decoding model, according to Bobo (2004), is useful in understanding "how a cultural product can evoke such different reactions" (p. 181). Bobo (2004) asserts that viewers do not read the text in isolation from their knowledge of the world or other texts and that meaning is constructed based on the viewer's background and position in the social structure such as race, class, and gender. Moreover, Fiske (1987) also asserts that a viewer does not only decodes meanings but also takes pleasure from the process of viewing, and this pleasure can come from opposing the encoded meanings, negotiating with it, or accepting it. Fiske (1987) further argues that pleasure is a way of controlling the production of meanings.

Likewise, Zaid (2014) also studied two public service television stations in Morocco, applying Hall's encoding/decoding model. Zaid's (2014) study suggests that the encoding/decoding model helps understand how audiences decode the encoded messages. He also argues that in Morocco, or what he calls non-Western audience, encoding and decoding the audience reading of the text not only depend on content but also on the metacommunicational messages – i.e., audience interpretations of a text by non-verbal cues. An essential element in the process of interpretation, according to Zaid (2014), are the codes. Zaid (2014) defines code as:

[I]nterpretive frameworks that are used by both producers and interpreters of texts. Codes can be verbal, and they include knowledge of phonological and syntactical codes and these must be shared by senders and receivers for understanding to occur. Codes can also be behavioral, such as protocols, rituals, role-playing, and games...In understanding even the simplest texts we draw on a repertoire of textual and social codes. (p. 289)

Since this study focuses on audiences' reception and interpretation of representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas on the Afghan media, I am analyzing participants' responses using the mentioned three decoding positions. I am only focusing on the decoding text by viewers since studying the encoding requires understanding the encoding meaning in the media text at the production level – production organizations, producers, writers, or directors. As Storey (2010) states, "the media professionals involved determined how 'raw' social event will be encoded in discourse" (p. 10). The soap operas aired on Afghan television stations are produced outside of Afghanistan; therefore, access to the production teams was not feasible. For that reason, I am mainly focusing on the decoding process of viewers.

Entertainment Education: A Communication Strategy

The notion of social change through the media is an integral part of this study. Entertainment-Education (EE) strategy focuses on using entertainment media as a tool to promote social change. As a theoretical framework, EE helps explore how the media in general and soap

operas in particular in the context of Afghanistan can promote social change and how television and soap opera as an entertainment media can stimulate discussions on social issues such as gender equality and women's empowerment.

According to Kincaid, Rimon, Piotrow, and Coleman (1992), entertainment can be an efficient approach to reach the public with a social message. As Brown and Singhal (1990) argue, entertainment media have a high potential to enlighten audiences on various social issues such as health, environment, family planning, gender equality, and mental health. Such social issues are prevalent all around the globe (Brown & Singhal, 1990). Brown and Singhal (1990) argue that it is essential to use practical media strategies and a commercial capability to attract and hold audiences to tackle social problems. EE, as a communication strategy, is used to achieve the objective of creating media content that is both commercial and informative. In other words, EE is a mechanism of delivering media messages in a way that can both educate and entertain viewers (Papa & Singhal, 2009). Singhal and Rogers (2004) contend that EE is not a theory but rather a communication strategy and a process of designing media programmes to increase audiences' knowledge of a social issue, shift social norms, create favourable attitudes, and change overt behaviours. EE is explicitly used to promote the development and social change at the individual, community, institutional, and societal levels (Brown & Singhal, 1999; Wang & Singhal, 1992). EE interventions can be designed for national campaigns, specific local audiences, or broader cultural space by incorporating a few lines of dialogues in a prime media program. For example, dedicating an entire episode of a prime media program, or designing an entire series utilizing EE strategy such as BBC radio soap opera, *Archers* (Singhal & Rogers, 2004).

EE is widely used worldwide to promote social change (Kawamura & Kohler, 2013) and has been employed in various countries around the globe, such as Mexico, Kenya, China, and India

(Brown & Singhal, 1990). EE approach has been used in developing soap operas, popular music, dances, and comic books (Papa & Singhal, 2009); however, soap operas have turned to be one of the major carriers of the EE strategy (Reinermann, Lubjuhn, Bouman, & Singhal, 2014; Singhal, Rogers, & Brown, 1993).

Singhal and Rogers (2002) describe that EE contributes to social change in two ways: first, on an individual level by motivating individual audience members' attitudes, behaviours, and awareness towards a socially desirable end; and at a systemic level by influencing audiences' external environment – policies, laws, and services – to create the needed setting for social change. An Indian talk show *Saytamev Jayate* can be a significant example of EE contribution at the system level. The talk show, hosted by a famous Indian film actor Aamir Khan, dealt with India's sensitive issues, such as rape, female foeticide, and affordable healthcare. The show raised awareness among the general public stimulated discussions, and motivated government officials to highlight the problems and social issues and take action. For instance, after discussing the issues of female foeticide, Rajasthan's chief minister established a fast-track court to prosecute doctors who commit female foeticide (Soningra, 2017; 21CF social impact, n.d.). Similarly, after the broadcast of the episode on fighting rape, Union Health Minister passed a decree banning invasive tests on rape survivors, and a one-stop crisis center was established in a hospital in Bhopal city (Soningra, 2017; 21CF social impact, n.d.).

Additionally, Papa and Singhal (2009) also assert that EE often stimulates conversation among audiences about social issues, addressed in an entertainment media programme, that can further lead to dialogue, decisions, and individual or collective actions. Hence, EE strategy can likely function as a social mobilizer, advocate, or agenda setter (Singhal & Rogers, 2004; Wallack, 1990). Examples of the EE approach can also be found in Hollywood; for instance, *All in the*

Family, an American sitcom TV series, discussed racial and ethnic concerns in the United States (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Moreover, gay and lesbian rights, AIDs, and child abuse are among the many other social issues portrayed in Hollywood, using EE communication strategy (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Also, McKee (2000) states, “considering that so much of popular culture supports unhealthy and at-risk lifestyles, the entertainment-education is one of the greatest communication revolutions of the 20th century” (p.155).

Furthermore, the EE strategy is also used in animated films and comics (McKee, Aghi, Varnegie, & Shahzadi, 2004). For instance, Meena, an animated film, was developed for Bangladesh in 1991 and spread to India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asian countries (McKee et al., 2004). I watched Meena in Pakistan during my secondary school days when my family and I lived there as refugees between 1994-2001. Meena is the story of a South Asian girl who is between seven to ten years of age. The show is designed very wisely to deal with girl rights, gender equality, and other critical issues of gender sensitivity in the South Asian context (McKee et al., 2004), where raising such issues can be challenging. Singhal and Rogers (2004) believe that the EE strategy will extend its scope to include other emerging social issues such as peace, conflict mediation, race relations, and reconstruction.

EE project designs are centred on formative research, and process and summative evaluation (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). By conducting formative research, the aim is to collect information on the target audiences' characteristics, needs, and preferences (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). Process and summative evaluation assess the EE programme, both during the implementation and after the completion, on whether it is reaching its objective of promoting social change (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). The assessments are done by, for example, analyzing audiences' feedbacks, the content of EE messages, and if the program, for example, focuses on women participation in the workforce or

girls' enrollment in school, by monitoring data from schools or workforce (Singhal & Rogers, 2004) during and at the end of EE programme broadcast. Most often, the letters from viewers or listeners of an EE programme are used to evaluate the programme and develop future scripts (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). Audience feedback can help understand the needs of society and allow audiences engagement in developing and designing an EE programme, making them active producers rather than passive consumers (Singhal & Rogers, 2004).

EE that initially was called Entertainment with proven social benefit, resulted from Miguel Sabido's theoretical efforts (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). Theories behind EE represent diverse disciplinary fields and ranges from a positivist perspective to critical theory and a humanistic perspective (Sood, Menard, & Witte, 2004). Critical social theory is increasingly integrated into EE debates and challenges the notion of "behaviourist cause-and-effect" understanding of communication (p. 164) and focuses more on reception analysis – "the process of interpretation, meaning-making, and change" (Tuftte, 2005, p. 164). EE theoretical studies are now moving beyond understanding the individual levels' effects on a broader community and system-level changes (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). The focus is not merely on what effects an EE programme may have but also on why and how EE may have such outcomes with an increased focus on audiences and their negotiation with message and content (Singhal & Rogers, 2004). Most recent EE theorizing focuses on the contextual theories – the relationship between society, institutions, and broader contexts – and audience-centred theories – audiences' interaction and response to EE programmes (Sood et al., 2004).

Theories from different disciplines are incorporated into the EE strategy; however, the feminist perspective lack EE strategy. As Steeves (1993) asserts, development communication activities – EE strategy being part of it – require research on women's roles and representations in

the Global South. Early scholarships on development communication did not explicitly discuss the role of gender in their discourse of the media and modernity (Wilkins, 1999). According to Obregon and Tufte (2014), the effectiveness of EE interventions can increase by formulating new visions into the strategy by redefining notions of development, communication, audiences, culture, education, and change in line with post-colonial critiques of development and development communication. An intersectional framework in EE strategy can help to avoid neo-liberal outcomes by focusing on social structures, power dynamics, differences and diversities such as gender, class, ethnicity, race, and ability. According to Collins and Bilge (2016), “the neoliberal world order relies on a global system of capitalism that is inflected through unequal relations of race, gender, sexuality, age, disability and citizenship” (p. 138). Therefore, in this study, I am discussing the importance of an intersectional framework in facilitating discussions the media’s role in promoting social change through EE interventions.

Molina-Guzmán and Cacho assert that intersectionality continues to be an important theoretical tool for analyzing the media (2014). Intersectional feminism aims to discuss how intersections of socially and culturally constructed categories such as gender, class, race, sexuality, and (dis)ability interact and contribute to systemic inequality (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality asserts that identity categories are interlocked and do not have meaning in isolation from one another (Hole & Jelača, 2018). Thus, intersectional feminism seeks to identify how gender interrelates with race and structural power or the lack thereof (Hole & Jelača, 2018). Intersectionality, according to Davis (2008), does not offer feminist inquiry a “normative straitjacket” or fixed set of rules or procedures, but it encourages new, explorative, and liable feminist research practice (p. 79).

Intersectionality sees the media as an essential contribution to social hierarchies (Lünenborg & Fürsich, 2014). Incorporating an intersectional perspective into the EE approach can allow reflection on intersectional experiences among different groups. Moreover, by doing so, prosocial soap operas can represent gendered and intersectional structures of power and privilege between genders in society. In Afghanistan, gender needs to be problematized through class, ethnicity, religion, and political identities. Furthermore, the intersectional lens in EE soap operas can likely avoid homogenizing women as a group and consider the difference between women based on class, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and the urban and rural culture that is highly visible in the context of Afghanistan. Additionally, designing an EE soap opera with an intersectional lens can likely promote alternative ways of thinking and highlight complexities among women as a group and recognize that social change is complex and non-linear.

It is worth mentioning that development communication and EE strategy have enriched by critiques and knowledge of post-colonial theory, critical social theory, and alternative citizen theories, (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). The social change paradigm of development communication has reshaped and redefined the modernization paradigm by providing critiques and alternative, flexible, multidimensional, and human-centred conception of development that focuses on values such as community involvement, human rights, and dialogue (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). While the modernization paradigm saw development problems as the third world's *backwardness*, the social change paradigm argues that development problems derive from social inequalities and unequal power relations in society (Makwambeni & Salawu, 2018). When focusing on social change through EE, the focus is on communication and dialogue-driven solutions rather than solely on information. As Waisbord (2005) asserts, the media do not have the magic and power of making people think and behave a certain way. However, instead, they are

only influential in providing the possibility to direct a message into social networks, stimulate communication, and make the message part of everyday interactions (Waisbord, 2005). The social change paradigm argues that development problems are more likely to resolve when the marginalized population can identify the problems in their everyday life and recognize their capacity to act collectively and individually on the problems (Tufté, 2001). The problem is not merely the lack of information about a social issue among people but rather the social structure and inequalities that suppress the discussion and debate on social issues. Therefore, the focus of development communication approaches shifted from individual behavioural change to a more holistic understanding of social and structural factors shaping individual behaviours (Tufté, 2005). Hence, can we argue that EE as a strategy can be used by the core nation based on their needs and social problems by identifying their pro-social changes and not an imported development strategy?

Tufté (2005) argues that recent EE initiatives vary conceptually and discursively in practice and how issues are delivered in the mass media (Tufté, 2005). While previously, the focus was on presenting “culturally-sensitive” messages (p. 166), today the focus is more on the “problem’s identification, social critique, articulation of debate, challenging power relations, and advocating social change” (Tufté, 2005, p. 166). Thus, by following post-colonial, critical social theories, and intersectional perspective while applying EE, new languages and formats can emerge that can be more inclusive. With the attention that in the context of Afghanistan, entertainment sources for everyone and particularly for women are limited and television plays a significant role as an entertainment medium, it can likely play a role in promoting social change by developing and delivering entertaining programmes with a social message.

Chapter Four

Research Design and Methodology

This chapter presents a discussion of the research design and methodology used for the current study. Since the focus of the study is to understand how gender relations are represented in transnational soap operas aired on Afghan televisions and how viewers interpret those representations, the aim has been to find research and methodological approaches that are suitable to present the analysis of the content of soap operas and experiences and viewpoints of both women and men, equally. Also, since the research is conducted in Afghanistan, a setting to some degree different from the Western world, it is crucial to select a research approach that can guide the study to present the data truthfully with the consideration of social and cultural context. Therefore, feminist research and methodology are open and flexible and allow sensitive research strategies deemed suitable for the study. Also, as a self-identified feminist, it is essential for me to conduct feminist research and avoid, as much as possible, hierarchies and inequalities in the research process.

Before moving to a detailed discussion of the study's research design, I present a brief overview of feminist research and feminist methodology.

Feminist Research

Over the decades, feminists have been challenging mainstream methodology and epistemology (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007) and the ways women, men, and social life are analyzed in social science (Harding, 1987). In the 1970s and 1980s, feminists questioned positivist and quantitative approaches in the research and argued whether they could sufficiently apprehend women's experiences (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007). The positivist approach of research was considered the correct and appropriate means of studying the social world (Hekman, 2007).

However, the positivist approach has always been criticized in social science by phenomenologists and critical theorists. For example, phenomenologists argued that “the starting point of social-scientific analysis must be the social actor’s concepts, not the ‘objective facts’ of positivism” (Hekman, 2007, p. 534). Similarly, critical theorists claim that “it is impossible to remove the normative dimension from the social sciences because all knowledge has a normative intent” (Hekman, 2007, p. 534). Although none of these criticisms and approaches focused on gender and feminism, they are significant in the emergence of feminist methodologies (Hekman, 2007).

Feminist research is known well for the work that feminists do, either qualitative or quantitative, that aims at challenging hierarchies and inequalities within the social system (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007). Feminists argued that the positivist research framework mainly presented men’s perspective, and women’s voices were marginalized. Thus, it was necessary to challenge mainstream research approaches and propose new techniques to present women’s standpoint in the research. Feminist research began with including women's lived experiences at the center of research and recognizing them as research participants (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Additionally, early feminist debates tended to differentiate quantitative and qualitative approaches and saw qualitative methods more accord with feminist values (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007).

Although it is difficult to say that there is a specific feminist method, epistemology, and methodology, feminist scholars have included distinct approaches in their work (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007). As Wilkinson and Morton (2007) state, “while no one definition of feminist research exists, and some argue a universal definition is not wanted, many feminist researchers recognize basic attributes that differentiate feminist research from traditional social science research” (p. 409). They further argue that feminist research becomes distinct and unique from traditional research for the questions, methodologies, knowledge, and purpose brought to the

research (Wilkinson & Morton, 2007). For Wilkinson and Morton (2007), feminist research raises questions about ontology; therefore, it is not merely a method but a whole process.

Feminist researchers have long challenged the mainstream ways of data collection, analysis, and reporting and have introduced innovative approaches to the research process (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007). Dominant ideas of the West, replicating whiteness, are no more the standard in feminist research. Significant elements that continue to sustain complexities in feminist research include work by and about specific groups (e.g., persons of color, gender non-conforming individuals, and persons with disabilities) and approaches to study the mentioned groups (e.g., post-colonial theory, standpoint theory, and postmodern/post-structural theory) (Olsen, 2005). Contributions of feminist research and feminist scholars in social science and humanities have been significant (Shanmugasundaram & Velayudhan, 2010) that made feminist methodology part of traditional methodology rather than a separate domain (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007).

Feminist research includes gender in the inquiry and research process (Hesse-Biber, 2014) and tends to be *for* women and not only *on* women (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007). Feminist research ought to focus on issues of broader social change and social justice (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2012). Renate (1983) also argues that research *for* women aims to take into account women's needs, interests, and experiences to improve women's lives; while research *on* women does not take into consideration methods suitable for feminist scholarship, and there is a lack of explanation on the selection of methods, problems, and limitations during the research.

Feminist research is indissolubly connected to feminism, and since there are *feminisms*, feminist research is also not tied to one specific method or discipline; instead, it is connected to the goal of empowering women (Pini, 2002) and other marginalized groups. Feminist research uses various methods – qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods – and focuses on social issues

through a gender lens (Hesse-Biber, 2014). It is also argued that research methodology and methods should reflect the specific research questions, and critical feminist concerns can be addressed by adopting a range of different methods and approaches (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007). Therefore, there is “no one correct method for feminist research” (Fonow & Cook, 2005, p. 2214).

Feminist Methodology

According to Harding (1987), methods are “techniques for gathering evidence,” and methodology is “theory and analysis of how the researcher does or should proceed” (p. 2) and the two are intertwined. Similarly, O’Neill (2002) sees methodology as “how should we go about producing knowledge” (p. 339). One of the main objectives of feminist methodology is to produce knowledge for social change (Naples, 2017) and support social justice (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Feminist scholars criticized positivist research methods for not incorporating women and other marginalized groups’ lived experiences and reducing them to a series of disconnected variables that ignore the complexities of social life (Naples, 2017). These concerns came as feminist scholars struggled with finding a place for alternative approaches within the academia since most of the knowledge was mainly based on men’s lives and thinking, and women’s lives were also studied and theorized from male perspectives (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007). Thus, the feminist methodology was developed as a reaction to dominant mainstream research methods and to propose alternative approaches to study experiences of women and other marginalized groups in academic research (Naples, 2017). Feminist research methodology criticizes the traditional approach’s theoretical principles from different perspectives (Wilkinson & Morton, 2007).

In the multidisciplinary field of women studies, there has never been anyone particular or correct feminist epistemology that formulates a specific feminist methodology (Fonow & Cook, 2005). Feminists apply different methods, informed by feminist values, that differ with context,

subject, and researcher (O'Neill, 2002). Feminist researchers also apply traditional scientific methods and, at times, modify them and propose or develop innovative methods to suit feminist values where traditional methods are not appropriate enough (Reinharz, 1992).

Over the years, the feminist methodology has expanded its research practice and can study diverse topics (Naples, 2017). According to Reinharz (1992), the literature on feminist methodology centers on four key questions:

- 1) “is there a feminist research method?
- 2) what does it consist of?
- 3) should there be a feminist research method? and
- 4) what is the relationship between feminist research method and other methods?” (p. 4).

Naples (2017) argues that in feminist research, researchers “explore how their personal, professional, and structural positions frame social scientific investigations” (p.2). Failure to do so results in “researchers inevitably reproduce dominant gender, race, and class biases” (Naples, 2017, p.3). Feminists have reconceptualized knowledge production processes that contributed to changes in the research process in many disciplines that require methodological and self-reflexive skills (Naples, 2017). Harding (1987) asserts that in feminist research methodology, the “objectivist” viewpoint should be avoided since “the *beliefs* and *behaviors* of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research. *This* evidence, too, must be open to critical scrutiny no less than what is traditionally defined as relevant evidence” (p. 9, italics in original).

Feminist research centralizes the relationship between researcher and researched to balance positions of power and authority (Hesse-Biber, 2014) and opens the discussion on “critical epistemological issues and researcher’s characteristics and relationship with research participants” (Olsen, 2018, p. 152). By practicing reflexive skills, the researcher acknowledges and understands

her/his/their social positions, experiences, assumptions, and location and how they can influence her/his/their research (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Reflexivity is also linked to the issues of accountability in the research process since “reflexivity should include reflecting on, and being accountable about personal, interpersonal, institutional, pragmatic, emotional, theoretical, epistemological and ontological influences on our research, and specially about our data analysis processes” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002, p. 130).

Feminist philosophers, nevertheless, struggle with “many of the problems that have vexed traditional epistemology, among them the nature of knowledge itself, epistemic agency, justification, objectivity and whether and how epistemology should be naturalized” (Alcoff & Potter, 1993, p. 1). While questioning the traditional epistemological issues, feminist epistemologists focused on gender roles in epistemology and knowledge production (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007). According to Naples (2017), since:

feminist research is open to critique and responsive to the changing dynamics of power that shape women’s lives and those of others who have been marginalized within academia, feminist researchers often act as innovators who are quick to develop new research approaches and frameworks. (p. 5)

Feminist Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods allow marginalized and silenced groups to have a voice and impact the conduct of research and are preferred by many feminists. Accordingly, it is also the preferred method for this current study. Feminisms and feminist qualitative research are significantly diverse, dynamic, and critical of mainstream research (Olsen, 2018). Feminist researchers and feminist theories have developed different approaches to social science methodology to expose the

masculinist bias with historically informed methods and disciplines in the social science field and opened new avenues of research (Hekman, 2007).

As mentioned earlier, feminist methodology and feminist research are mainly concerned with knowledge production: how the knowledge is produced, who produces the knowledge, about whom, for whom, and for what purpose (Olsen, 2018). Therefore, feminist qualitative research centres on marginalized groups of the society, such as women, radicalized groups, persons with a disability, and gender nonconforming persons (Olsen, 2018). Focusing on marginalized groups and individuals allows the recognition of different identities and subjectivities constructed in a specific social and historical context rather than focusing on whiteness's dominant topic as a standard (Olsen, 2018). Despite any approach taken, i.e., standpoint, post-colonial, or postmodern/post-structural, feminist qualitative research is concerned with the question of voice and the text that discusses how to make women's voices heard without manipulating or misrepresenting their voices (Olsen, 2005).

Research Design

Audience researchers who seek to explore reading and viewing practices in everyday settings and cultures tend to employ qualitative research (Lewis, 2002). Accordingly, this study is primarily qualitative, guided by feminist research and methodology. It is a qualitative case study that explores and analyzes more in-depth representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas and audiences' interpretations of those representations.

A case study is generally referred to as research that focuses on a single case or cases or issues (Orum, 2001), unlike the studies that seek to generalize through comparative analysis or collecting a large number of viewpoints (Reinharz, 1992). Case studies deal with research focusing on *why* and *how* questions and presenting phenomena in a real-life setting (Yin, 2003). Feminist

case studies “usually consist of a fully developed description of a single event, person, group, organization, or community” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 164). By employing a feminist case study, this study aims to avoid male-dominated theorizing (Reinharz, 1992) and concentrate on the community’s interpretations of gender relations on the media and media’s role in prevailing social issues as women’s rights and gender equality (Mabry, 2008). Employing a case study approach to this research allows us to closely understand the issue from participants’ experiences and perceptions (Mabry, 2008), since understanding the interpretations of representations of gender relations requires understanding the phenomenon from the audiences’ perspective.

Data Collection

Since the study’s focus is to explore representations of gender relations in transnational Turkish soap operas on Afghan television station Tolo TV and understand the interpretations of those representations by audiences, the data collection focuses on both the content and reception by applying multi-method qualitative research. Multi-method research applies to case study approaches (Roller, 2013), and it allows the qualitative study to explore relatively complex phenomena “and unfold at multiple levels of analysis and testing theories that account for such phenomena” (Matsaganis, 2016, p. 1333). In a multi-method research approach, two or more qualitative or quantitative methods are used to collect data (Matsaganis, 2016). This study, using multiple qualitative methods, aims to increase the data validity, add more complexity to findings, and broaden the perspective on the topic (Loosen & Scholl, 2012). Additionally, each research method has its limitation; thus, applying a multi-method approach helps address the limitations. For instance, content analysis allows understanding the text (Krippendorff, 2004), and the focus group allows understanding the reception and interpretations of the text. Thus, by combining both the methods, the data findings are holistic, presenting both the content and reception.

Feminist research often combines the analysis of “found” data such as newspapers, magazines, and films and “produced” data such as interviews, focus groups, and observations (Reinharz, 1992, p. 148), which is the approach taken for this study which combines the data from soap operas that already exists with the data produced from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

Data collection for the study took place in two phases. The first phase included watching soap operas for content analysis; the second phase conducting FGDs with the study participants. Some of the soap operas for content analysis I watched while I was in Ottawa and some I watched while I was in Kabul for FGDs. Since the study focuses on the Afghan audience and Afghan media, it is deemed essential to carry out part of the fieldwork, i.e., FGDs, in Afghanistan to obtain Afghan audiences’ perspectives living in Afghanistan.

FGDs were held in Kabul city. Kabul city was chosen for numerous reasons: first, the issue of security. Security is an important issue to consider while researching in Afghanistan. Security is relatively better in Kabul than in other parts of the country, making travelling around the city relatively easier. Second, familiarity with the city; since Kabul is my hometown, I am familiar with the city and navigating around the city is not an issue. Finally, access to participants and having an extensive professional network in Kabul made it feasible to reach potential participants for the study. Furthermore, Kabul is also aligned well with the broad interests of the study as it has high satellite reach by television networks, and there is slightly less issue with the shortage of electricity for households than other cities.

Content analysis. Content analysis is a widely used method in social sciences and media studies and is applied, both qualitative and quantitative (Margolis & Zunjarwad, 2018). Content analysis is seen as both an analytical approach and method to study cultural artifacts (Weber, 2004) and can help analyze texts by counting or interpreting themes in them (Reinharz, 1992).

Since this study is qualitative and guided by feminist research, I am applying qualitative feminist content analysis. Feminist content analysis is an efficient tool to study cultural artifacts to explore feminist ideology, cultural gender beliefs, and gender stereotypes (Leavy, 2007). For this research, I am analyzing the content of transnational soap operas as cultural artifacts to analyze representations of gender relations, gender stereotypes, and whether they have a feminist perspective, including other aspects linked with audio-visual text (Byerly, 2016). Feminist content analysis is also known as “discourse analysis, rhetoric analysis, and deconstruction” (Reinharz & Kulick, 2007, p. 258). The feminist content analysis allowed to identify the ways gender relations are discussed and portrayed in transnational soap operas by focusing on words, behaviours, and other visual data to uncover themes and patterns of the portrayal of gender relations (Huckin, 2008).

The soap operas were watched using Jadoo, a device that allows watching South and Central Asian television programmes in any geographical location. During watching the episodes, I focused on looking for portrayals of women and men, relationships between women and men, between men, and between women – husband and wife, father and daughter, sister and brother, male friends, female friends, and relatives. I focused on behaviours and interactions between characters to illustrate how gender relations are represented and took notes. Gender relations were considered interpersonal and context-bound rather than a homogenous or universal category (Flax, 1987). Margolis and Zunjarwad (2018) believe that content analysis is more valuable when used with other research methods. Therefore, for this study, content analysis is used along with focus group discussions.

Auto-ethnography. Since I am analyzing the content of two Turkish soap operas on Tolo T.V., I am presenting my interpretations and perspectives on the representations of gender

relations in the soap operas. Therefore, throughout the dissertation, I use the first person 'I' while discussing my perspectives and analysis. As Davies (2012) states, "writing as 'I' has forced comparisons between a personal and impersonal analysis of social interaction" (p. 2). Davies (2012) further states, "writing from the perspective of my emotional experiences and about my emotions as a researcher raises – as feminist research often does – emotional as well as intellectual issues" (p. 5).

From a feminist perspective, research cannot be separated from the text; therefore, the inclusion of voice and acknowledgment of power structures in the research and writing process is vital (Mitchell, 2017). According to Ettore (2017), autoethnography is feminist critical writing and argues that new feminist meanings and subjectivities are presented by sharing their own stories.

Autoethnography, developed from ethnography, is "an approach to studying culture from the perspective of the people in the culture" (Elias, 2017, p. 590). The term autoethnography is derived from *auto* (self), *ethnos* (culture), and *graphy* (research process) that allows researchers to include their voices and challenge the notion of silent authorship (Holt, 2003). While applying autoethnography, researchers reflect on their own experiences and reactions to analyzing the phenomenon under study (Elias, 2017; Witkin, 2014) and cultural subtleties that researchers challenge (Ettore, 2017). For Ettore (2017), autoethnography is a feminist method that transforms "personal stories into political realities by revealing power inequalities inherent in human relationships and the complex cultures of emotions embedded in these unequal relationships" (p. 2). Autoethnographic research is written in first person discussing personal perspectives and issues affected by history, social structure, and culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Autoethnography and writing in the first person seemed the optimal choice for my study since it allowed me to present my perspective, interpretations, and reflection as a participant in the study. Moreover, since I analyze the content of Paiman and Qesay Maa and the analysis represents my interpretations, autoethnography is deemed a practical approach. While using autoethnography, I recognize that as a feminist researcher, I am an active participant in the study and accordingly present my perspectives and voice shaped by my culture, experiences, and knowledge of the world.

Focus group discussion. The materiality of my research is to not only confine what media texts express and represent about gender relations but also encompass the views of research participants on the issue. FGD is instrumental in audience reception studies as it offers an understanding of the construction of meanings in a collective and place manner (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). The objective of FGDs was to seek responses to my research questions. To collect data to understand viewers' perceptions of representations of gender relations portrayed in transnational soap operas, I conducted three separate FGDs with both female and male participants.

Watching television is a favourite family pastime in Afghanistan (Altai, 2015); male and female family members watch TV together. Therefore, the views of both women and men are essential for the study to understand their perspectives on representations of gender relations in the media and how these representations can shape their views and perspectives on gender relations.

FGDs were conducted in three groups – one all-male group consisting of six participants, and two all-female groups with three and four participants – 13 participants, six males and seven females. Table 1 below presents the demographic characteristics – age, gender, occupation, and marital status – of FGD participants.

Table 1

Demographics of the study participants

Participant	Age range	Education	Gender	Marital Status	Occupation
FGD 1 Participant 1	25-35	Master	Male	Married	Employed
FGD 1 Participant 2	35-45	Master	Male	Married	Employed
FGD 1 Participant 3	35-45	Master	Male	Married	Employed
FGD 1 Participant 4	25-35	Master	Male	Single	Employed
FGD 1 Participant 5	35-45	Master	Male	Married	Employed
FGD 1 Participant 6	25-35	Master	Male	Married	Employed
FGD 2 Participant 1	18-24	Graduate	Female	Single	Employed and Homemaker
FGD 2 Participant 2	18-24	Graduate	Female	Single	Intern and Homemaker
FGD 2 Participant 3	18-24	Graduate	Female	Single	Intern and Homemaker
FGD 3 Participant 1	25-35	Graduate	Female	Single	Employed and Homemaker
FGD 3 Participant 2	25-35	Graduate	Female	Married	Employed and Homemaker
FGD 3 Participant 3	25-35	Graduate	Female	Single	Employed and Homemaker
FGD 3 Participant 4	25-35	Graduate	Female	Married	Employed and Homemaker

FGDs with 13 participants provided critical viewpoints that supplemented data from the content analysis. FGDs were relevant to the meaning-making dimension and interpretations of gender relations portrayed in transnational soap operas by viewers. During FGDs, data generated by participants responding to questions also included body language, laughter, and sometimes interruptions and incomplete statements that made the data more complex and open to different interpretations (Thomas, 1995). These complexities ought to include my engagement as the researcher to obtain a depth of analysis that other methods such as surveys, emails, or letters might not obtain (Thomas, 1995).

Furthermore, FGDs allowed me to establish a relationship with my research participants that feminist research emphasizes (Prasad, 2018). FGD setting was a useful tool in stimulating

discussions and reflection among participants as the group setting was developed in a “self-organizing” way that allowed the participants to own the space (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 6). It was more of an experience and opinion sharing process rather than informing the researcher.

Focus Group Discussions Process. Focus group discussions were held in Dari, one of the official languages of Afghanistan, to allow participants to put forward their viewpoint confidently and effortlessly. Female and male focus groups were separate, which was a deliberate choice for my research design. By conducting separate female and male FGD sessions, the aim was to allow female participants a safe place where they could share their views and experiences without being intimidated or dominated by male participants. Likewise, feminism argues that women’s lived experiences should be included in building theory (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013); thus, giving them the platform to speak freely is vital. One can argue that male participants can also be intimidated by female participants in the group, which is less likely to happen considering the highly patriarchal societies and, in this case, the Afghan society. Therefore, it was considered important to have gender segregated FGDs. The participants were also informed that their names and personal details would not be mentioned in the study.

Participants were also told that they could receive the approved version of the thesis after its completion and approval if they are willing. Before starting the FGDs and turning on the audio recorder, this discussion allowed us – participants and I – to build a relationship that was not of a researcher and passive information-givers (researched) but between participants of the study who shared their views and experiences. As Oakley (1981) asserts, “personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit

others into their lives” (p.58). FGD sessions were audio-recorded, with participants’ consent to avoid missing any information or misreporting any information shared by participants.

Sample

Purposive sampling is suggested for qualitative research (Creswell, 2014) and studies that use focus groups (Munday, 2014). Participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling. The selected participants were over the age of 18 years and residing in Kabul city. Since purposive sampling allows making judgments “about who or what to sample with reference to the purpose of the study” (Emmel, 2014b, p. 33), it was considered a suitable sampling technique for this study. While selecting the sample for FGDs, it was not specified that only participants who watch soap operas or watch a specific soap opera could participate, since it is also essential to understand the experiences of those who do not watch soap operas. Additionally, since the study included the perspectives of both interested and uninterested viewers of transnational soap operas, it added maximum variations by including unusual cases to present different cases and standpoints (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the objective is not to make claims that this selected sample is representative of the entire population since the concern is not how many or what portion of the population thought or acted, but rather to “[capture] complexity, nuance, and the dynamics of the lived experiences” (Emmel, 2014a, p. 138).

Soap operas for content analysis were also selected purposefully. I selected two Turkish transnational soap operas with a female protagonist, and their stories revolved mostly around a female lead. The two Turkish soap operas, *Paiman* and *Qesay Maa* (Our Story) were selected from Tolo TV, one of the Afghan private television networks, based on the reviews of media reports since 2010 in Afghanistan. Tolo is the first private television channel in Afghanistan, launched in

2004 (Afghanistan Media Guide, 2011). According to Altai (2014) report, Tolo reaches around 75 percent (i.e., six million) of TV users in Afghanistan and is a popular television network.

Furthermore, the two soap operas selected for the study were airing at the time of the study's data collection, which made it easier to access them. Although the soap operas on Tolo TV are dubbed in Dari and Pashto languages to make it understandable for viewers, it is challenging to access the dubbed version on YouTube due to copyright issues. Therefore, I decided to select the soap operas that aired during the study's data collection period. Furthermore, the qualitative content analysis relies heavily on the researcher's readings and interpretations that can be intensive and time-consuming; therefore, much qualitative content analysis involves small samples of media content (Macnamara, 2005). For this study, a small sample of eight episodes of two Turkish soap operas – four episodes from each soap opera – on Tolo TV was selected for content analysis.

Participants Recruitment Process

To recruit study participants, I used different channels such as Facebook and professional network. I posted the invitation letter on Facebook to invite potential and interested participants in the study (see Appendix I). I also contacted my professional network – former colleagues and University peers in Kabul – and invited them to participate in the FGDs and/or introduce and refer other potential participants in their networks. I received no response on the Facebook post; however, some former colleagues and peers responded to the invitation and introduced some potential participants for the study, among whom some agreed to participate, and some denied the invitation.

I also followed Munday's (2014) suggestion for easing the recruitment process and minimizing last-minute dropouts by recruiting “groups or organizations associated with the research topic” (p. 248) and recruited participants for two focus group discussions from two

organizations working for women and youth rights and empowerment. Furthermore, former colleagues also played informal gatekeepers' role and helped facilitate access to potential participants (Munday, 2014). Informal gatekeepers played an essential role in building trust with participants as the right contact that the participants knew and trusted. An informal gatekeeper accompanied me to the focus group and introduced me to participants. Since the informal gatekeepers had a prior connection with participants, their presence at the beginning of the session helped break the ice and ease the process. Also, to ease participation, FGDs were held in locations easily accessible to participants such as their office and university spaces that did not require them to travel merely for the FGDs (Munday, 2014). The male FGD took place in one of the private universities on Darulaman Palace road, south-western part of Kabul. Since the participants were students at the university, it was convenient for them to have the FGD inside the university. The female FGD groups were held in Shahr-e-Naw and Kart-e-Parwan areas, north-west parts of Kabul. Participants of FGDs belong to different ethnic groups such as Hazara, Tajik, Pashtun, and Uzbek, which allowed different perspectives.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an essential step of research through which we make sense of the collected data (verbal or visual). The purpose of qualitative data analysis is to describe a phenomenon (Flick, 2014). Before commencing the process of analysis, the data were organized and prepared for the process of analysis. The recordings of FDGs were transcribed, and the field notes were typed up on the computer. For the content analysis, each episode of soap operas was transcribed with notes.

Focus group data. The thematic analysis approach identifies and analyzes themes within the FGD data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the thematic analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke's steps. All the FGD session audio recordings were transcribed and translated into English from Dari. The

transcripts were read thoroughly to be familiarized with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After reading the transcripts carefully, the process of coding started (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Coding is an essential step in data analysis through which judgments are made about data's meaning (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The process of coding started with open coding by marking the transcripts and identifying codes and concepts. After reading the transcripts and identifying codes, field notes were also reviewed for the themes, codes and concepts. After all the transcripts were coded, the codes were then sorted into the identified themes. Themes are "abstract constructs" identified by the researcher before, during, or after data collection (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 708). According to Ryan and Bernard, themes, can be identified from the literature, the data, or the researcher's experience with the topic (2000). For this study, the themes were identified both from literature and data itself. The analysis started with predetermined themes retrieved from research questions, theoretical framework, and literature review, and new themes and sub-themes were added that emerged from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The themes were then named and labelled to describe what they represent (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The final step is presenting the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When presenting the analysis, I used direct quotes and paraphrasing to provide my analysis and leave the space open for readers' analyses (Reinharz, 1992).

Content analysis data. Analysis the soap operas' content was guided by the research question: How are gender relations portrayed in transnational soap operas on television in Afghanistan?

A codebook was developed with predetermined codes retrieved from research questions, theoretical framework, and literature for the content analysis. The content of soap operas was

coded using both inductive coding that is evolved from open coding and deductive coding that are evolved from prior codes (Margolis & Zunjarwad, 2018).

The content analysis of the selected two Turkish soap operas started with going through the episodes, taking notes, and modifying the codebook by adding new codes and leaving out less relevant code.

After watching the episodes, the codebook was reviewed to make sense of the data and sort the codes into themes and sub-themes that were predetermined – based on literature, research questions, and theoretical framework – and retrieved from the data. A sample of the notes from one of the episodes is presented in Appendix (H). Notes were utilized to gather relevant data. The themes that emerged during content analysis and were identified helped in the process of coding and analyzing data.

The presumption was that the portrayal of gender relations on soap operas are often patriarchally biased, which is also demonstrated in the literature review on women's representations in the media. From this perspective, soap operas' content was looked for concepts such as gender roles, traditional roles, family structure, expressions of emotions, focus on looks and appearance.

Ethical Considerations

McNeill and Chapman (2005) state that “ethics or moral principles must guide research” (p. 12); thus, is it important to consider ethical issues during all the stages of the research – data collection, interpretation, and data reporting. Therefore, it is crucial for me as the researcher to consider the ethical issues in the research and, consider my participants' rights and my responsibilities during the research process (McNeill & Chapman, 2005).

Before conducting data collection, it was essential to obtain approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the University of Ottawa. REB of the University of Ottawa approved this research on April 5, 2018 (see Appendix A).

While contacting and inviting participants to participate in the study, they were provided with information about the research topic, the purpose of the study and how the collected data will be used. Participants were also informed that they have the right to accept or deny the invitation to participate in the research or withdraw anytime during the FGD session if they change their mind. However, the collected data cannot be withdrawn due to the nature of the group discussion since it is not possible for the researcher during data analysis to classify what each participant said. Participants were also assured that if they decide to participate in the FGD, they may choose not to answer any particular questions during the FGD session (McNeill & Chapman, 2005).

Although gatekeepers assisted in reaching potential participants for the study, consent was obtained from participants directly (Bell, 2014), and all the information was provided directly to them by me as the researcher. Participants preferred verbal consent; therefore, their consent was recorded and transcribed.

One of the ethical issues was participants' safety, which was taken into consideration by conducting FGD sessions in the locations convenient and easily accessible to participants. Also, privacy and confidentiality of the information participants provide are crucial and should be protected as much as possible (McNeill & Chapman, 2005). Therefore, participants' names and any personal information are not mentioned anywhere in the research narrative to avoid any possibility of tracing back to participants (McNeill & Chapman, 2005).

Limitations and Challenges to the Study

The study included some limitations that ought to be mentioned. One of the limitations of the study is the generalization of findings. Since it is the case of particular groups in a particular location, the findings may not reflect different groups' behaviours in different locations and settings. Sample in qualitative studies are usually small; therefore, apprehending variants in a small sample can create challenges (Emmel, 2014a).

Furthermore, there were challenges in recruiting participants, particularly male participants. There was a lack of interest among men to share their views on soap operas. Soap operas are presumed to be a female genre, and it is assumed that only women are interested in watching soap operas. Most of the men contacted to participate in the study rejected saying they do not watch soap operas and therefore do not have anything to share. Also, there is a lack of awareness about research and research practices in Afghan society that results in reluctance and lack of interest in participating in research.

Furthermore, participants' dropout rate was another challenge. There were times when participants dropped out of the FGDs the night before a session. Moreover, time and schedule conflicts occurred; initially, it was proposed to have two male FGD sessions, but because of the conflicting schedules, I had to combine two FGDs into one, accommodating six participants – all male.

My research relied on participants from one geographical location versus several separate cities in Afghanistan. Due to security concerns and time constraints, data were collected only in Kabul city and participants recruited were mostly from urban residents. Therefore, the study lacks a rural perspective. There will undoubtedly be substantial local differences between rural and urban residents and their perspectives that the study cannot represent.

Additionally, content analysis of transnational soap operas includes entirely and solely my interpretations as the researcher of the study; the same content can be interpreted differently by someone in a different social position and location.

Role of the Researcher

My case study relies on multiple sources of data collection and my subjective positionality as a researcher. As a feminist conducting feminist research, it crucial that I explain my positionality in my research. Moreover, I believe the research process may have been dependent on aspects of my identity, knowledge, and experiences; therefore, it is vital to present the different experiences I faced during my research process. I am a 32 years old able-bodied, heterosexual woman of color. In the context of Afghanistan, I am a middle-class, educated Pashtun woman and acknowledge my privileges that come with the class, ethnicity, and education. My interest in this study has evolved from my interest in soap operas growing up and how I imitated, adapted, and at times criticized and problematized the characteristics of characters in my favourite soap operas. Television and soap operas have played a role in my life growing up.

Additionally, my positionality as an Afghan woman, educated in the West, seeking to analyze the discourse of representations of gender relations on transnational soap operas, and mainly, Afghan audiences' interpretations living in Afghanistan is complex. As Mankekar (1999) asserts, while studying television representation of Indian Womanhood and conducting fieldwork in India, "...as a postcolonial Indian woman socialized into the very discourse of Indian Womanhood that I critique, my own subjectivity is inextricably entangled with this study" (p. 30). I decided to conduct the research in Afghanistan with the Afghan audiences because I *belong* to the culture and call it *home*, and because that culture shaped my own subjectivity.

The purpose of this study is not to find truth but rather to stimulate discussions on representations of gender relations in the media and feminist media studies in the context of Afghanistan through exploring and reporting study participants' and my experiences and thoughts about the topic. As Backer (2018) affirms, "ideological media criticism is an act of interpretation. As such, the critic does not uncover the objective truth of a media text, but rather constructs an argument in an effort to get her audience to think about the relationship between a media text and its social reality" (p.17). Therefore, the power relations between myself as a researcher and study participants were crucial to be taken into account. I acknowledge the power and privilege I have as a researcher, and therefore, I intended to practice reflexivity throughout the research process to deconstruct power (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). Participants of this research are not seen as passive objects of the study but rather as active knowers (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). Furthermore, as a researcher, I am also a participant in the study as I incorporate my perspectives and experiences throughout the research process and acknowledge that neither my interpretations nor the participants' interpretations of Paiman and Qesay Maa are final but rather an invitation for further debates, discussions, and conversations (Becker, 2018).

It is important to note that my upbringing as an upper-middle-class Pashtun woman and trained in feminist theory in the West has shaped my perspectives on different social issues, particularly gender and women's issues. It is also important to acknowledge that since I am conducting critical research at *home*, I understand how my *home* issues are positioned globally, particularly in the First World. Therefore, I need to be aware and not further the colonial discourse around Afghanistan and Afghan people as passive, docile, and silent. Thus, it is essential to acknowledge that gender discrimination, sexism, homophobia, and patriarchal oppression are not unique to Afghan society. The mentioned social issues are dominant in many societies globally,

perhaps, in different forms. In doing so, I provide a historical overview of Afghanistan, cultural context, and Afghan women's socio-cultural status and movements. Notwithstanding, understanding the context is not only essential while studying Global South, but also crucial in studying Global North. As Willems (2014) argues,

Media anthropology's interest in and preoccupation with context should, however, not be equated with a belief that the Global South is by nature a radically different place that can only be understood in context. Instead, context is considered to be crucial in all settings, whether in the Global North or Global South. (p.16)

Moreover, throughout the research, self-reflexivity allowed me to pay close attention to my involvement in all stages of the process and my insider/outsider positioning. I identify myself as an insider-outsider during the data collection process and throughout the research. Being an Afghan, speaking the languages, and understanding the cultural and religious complexities made me an insider. However, living/studying in Canada, being affiliated to a Western University, living far from the daily fear of war and conflict, and not experiencing the challenges and changes on the ground in Afghanistan as those living inside Afghanistan make me an outsider. Naples (1996) argues that outsider and insider positions are not fixed, hence, fluid. They change based on social locations and experiences; therefore, as a researcher, one is never fully an insider or outsider (Naples, 1996). Therefore, reflecting on my insider-outsider position as a Muslim Afghan woman living/studying in Canada/West allows me to acknowledge that different factors in my identity guide and inform this research. As Moghissi (1999) states, "being away from 'home' sometimes may be the only way one can look at 'home' critically, dispassionately and with reason" (p. 216).

Furthermore, the process of completing my Ph.D. degree, during the last few years, has defined my life in many ways. I have tried to keep professionalism in my research process. However, there have been factors out of my control that might have impacted my work. Pregnancy

and having a child while not having family around was one of the challenges that affected my research process's speed and timeline. Also, travelling for data collection to Kabul with a six-month-old child was challenging since I had to play two different roles, a researcher who had to conduct data collection and a mother who had to leave her child behind and be home on time for her child to feed and take care of. Although I had my parents and sister in Kabul, who helped me a lot through the process by taking care of my daughter, keeping the balance between motherhood and research was challenging.

I also want to discuss gender roles in the fieldwork and my personal experience during conducting FGDs with both women and men. Feminist literature on research and methodology have widely covered the topic of interviewing women and experiences of women interviewing women (e.g., Oakley, 1981); there is less reflection on experiences of women interviewing men (Lee, 1997). Therefore, I believe it is significant to present my experience of interviewing men as a feminist female interviewer/researcher. Although it is vital to mention that all the sessions went very respectfully, I consider it essential to describe a few issues.

As a feminist researcher conducting feminist research, my role was to create an environment where participants could freely own the space and share their thoughts and experiences. However, while conducting FGDs with male participants, the power relations and the notion of owning the space was different. Given that we live in a highly male-dominant and patriarchal society and Afghan society is not free of it, FGDs with male participants had me feel that domination. As the researcher, I felt obliged to listen to male participants' problematic views, which made the session felt oppressive to me as a woman. As Smart (1984) states:

When the interviewer actually is a woman and the interviewee is a man the interview situations becomes especially loaded. It is extremely difficult for the interviewer to break the mould because not only does she jeopardise the interview, but she has to challenge the conventions of

'polite' conversation. The feminist interviewer can therefore experience the interview as doubly oppressive. (p. 156)

Moreover, the ethical emphasis is most often on security and safety of study participants, which is undoubtedly a critical issue. However, we often overlook the researcher's safety in the field, particularly a female researcher's safety. During the data collection in Kabul, I focused on meeting study participants and conducting FGDs on the locations and at the times that were convenient to participants. I had to travel to locations by cabs or public transportations, sometimes in the late evenings. Travelling alone as a female in the late evening is not free of risks in Kabul, but since participants' safety and convenience are the priority, we often overlook and compromise our safety as researchers. Being said that, I believe it is equally important to take into account the safety and risks researchers may face in the field along with participants.

Furthermore, it is essential to discuss the issues a female researcher may face during the entire research process, such as data collection, interviewing, and accessing study participants. As Lee (1997) argues, women researchers and researchers, in general, ought to be realistic about the potential risks during the research and interview processes. Additionally, feminist research's strength lies in the fact that women refuse to put aside their experiences as women when conducting research (Morawski, 1994).

Despite the limitations and challenges, this study is significant in initiating the discussions on representations of gender relations in the media in Afghanistan and the opening path for Afghan feminist media studies. Although other sectors have been studied in terms of gender inclusion and exclusion, and equality, much remains to be done in Afghanistan's media industry regarding gender representations.

Chapter Five

Representations of Gender Relations

This chapter presents the findings of the content analysis of the soap operas. The findings discuss the representations of gender relations in Paiman and Qesay Maa. Having coded and derived notable themes from eight episodes of the two Turkish soap operas on Tolo TV, it became evident that the portrayal of gender relations are often in stereotypical manners. Below, I highlight and unpack the themes that describe how the selected transnational soap operas represent gender relations. First, I provide summaries of the soap operas' plotline to build an understanding of the stories, followed by a brief description of the eight watched episodes (for a full description of the episodes, refer to Appendix G), and then demographic details of the soap operas characters in Table 2 and 3.

The two analyzed Turkish soap operas, dubbed in Dari, fulfil the study's task as they have female lead characters, and the storylines move around their lives, relationships, and struggles within themselves and others around them. Apart from the main characters, other supporting characters are also mentioned throughout the analysis. These characters regularly appear in the analyzed episodes.

The Shows

Paiman. Paiman, (Covenant in English; Hayat Sarkisi in Turkish) is a Turkish soap opera aired on Tolo TV. The series' first season was aired between 2016 and 2017 on Kanal D, a nationwide television channel in Turkey. The drama series is directed by Cem Karci (male) and written by Mahinur Ergun (female).

Paiman, at the time of data collection for this study, aired from Saturday to Thursday at 7:30 pm (Kabul time) for an hour. Paiman is the story of two friends, Bairam and Saleh, and their

children's lives. Bairam and Saleh get into a dispute over a mine extraction tool that causes their separation for years. According to Bairam, Saleh is not capable enough to make fair use of the tool. He asks Saleh for the tool as his family is in the mining business, and the tool can help him carry his business forward successfully. Saleh refuses Bairam's offer, and Bairam, to take revenge, gets engaged to Amina, the woman Saleh loves. Bairam again offers Saleh that he will leave Amina and the village if he accepts his offer and gives him the tool. Saleh accepts the offer, and Bairam leaves the village and Amina and moves to Istanbul. Bairam gets married to Suhaila in Istanbul, and Saleh marries Amina in the village.

After years, Bairam becomes a successful mining businessman who now has two sons, Husain and Karim. His sons are highly educated and settled in abroad and Istanbul. On the other hand, Saleh is addicted to alcohol and has two daughters, Melek and Hulya. Saleh's wife, Amina, has passed away, and his daughters are taking care of the house and livelihoods. Saleh and his family live in deplorable financial conditions. After years, Bairam comes to his village to reconcile with his friend Saleh. In an effort to make peace and reunite, they decide to marry their children to one and other. Both friends decide to engage Melek and Karim and marry them when they grow up. Years later, when Karim completes his education In Germany, he is called back by his father to Istanbul. With his son Karim, Bairam moves to the village to live along with his friend Saleh so that their children can bond and fulfil their promise. However, their children are raised differently in different cities, and they have established their own lives and shifted their love interests and goals in different directions. Karim and Melek do not want to get married, but Hulya, Saleh's younger daughter, who, since childhood wanted to marry Karim, plans the situation as such that makes Karim marry her instead of her sister, Melek. Karim, who does not want to marry either

Hulya or Melek, makes the sacrifice and marries Hulya to fulfil his father’s promise. Karim leaves Hulya on the night of their wedding and goes to Germany to live his own life.

Paiman’s story moves around Bairam’s family, their relationships, and their ups and downs. Hulya is the main female lead, and her struggles and desires lead the story. Bairam’s family celebrates Ramadan by fasting, which indicates that it is a Muslim family. However, other families and characters’ religion, aside from Bairam’s family members, are unknown.

To get familiar with the characters discussed throughout the thesis, Table 1 presents the brief demographic explanation of the characters in Paiman. For a detailed description of each character with an image, refer to Appendix (F).

Table 2

Demographics of characters in Paiman

	Name	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Occupation
1	Hulya	25-30	Female	Married	unknown
2	Zainab	25-30	Female	Married	Unknown
3	Nila	30-40	Female	Married	Homemaker
4	Jeena	20-25	Female	Single	Works at restaurant
5	Suhaila	45-55	Female	Married	Homemaker
6	Bada	18-20	Female	Married	Student
7	Khadija	45-55	Female	Single	Unknown
8	Bairam	50-60	Male	Married	Business owner
9	Atif	35-45	Male	Married	Driver
10	Maher	27-37	Male	Single	unknown
11	Kaya	30-40	Male	Single	Restaurant owner
12	Karim	25-30	Male	Married	Business owner
13	Husain	27-35	Male	Married	Business owner

Episode one. This episode is about Bairam and Suhaila's divorce, Zainab's pregnancy, her decision to marry Husain again, and Hulya and Karim's wrangles over Hulya's involvement in some misadventures.

Episode two. This episode is about Hulya and Karim's continued wrangles, Husain and Zainab's wedding preparations, and Bairam's efforts to make Suhaila reconsider her separation decision.

Episode three. This episode is about Suhaila's taking revenge on Khadija, Karim's attempt to erase Hulya's past bad memories, and Hulya's arrest.

Episode four. This episode is about Hulya and Karim's wedding preparations, Bairam remembering and sharing his friendship and dispute with Saleh.

Qesay maa. Qesay Maa (Our Story in English; Bizim Hikaye in Turkish) is a Turkish soap opera aired on Tolo TV. The drama series aired between 2017 and 2019. The first season was directed by Serdar Gözelekli (male) and later seasons were directed by Koray Kerimglu (male). The first season script was written by Hatice Meryem (female) and Banu Kiremitçi Bozkurt (female), and for later seasons, Seray Şahiner (female) is the leading scriptwriter. Qesay Maa was broadcast on Fox, one of the leading free to air television networks in Turkey.

Qesay Maa, at the time of data collection for this study, aired from Saturday to Thursday at 8:00 pm (Kabul time) for an hour. According to the IMDb website, it is an adaptation of the Shameless series, famous American comedy-drama series. The soap opera depicts a poor and dysfunctional family of six siblings, two sisters and four brothers. The father, Fikri, is addicted to alcohol who spends his days drinking and causing disasters. The mother, Shukran, has left the family. The elder sister, Filiz, who is the elder of all siblings, takes care of her younger siblings. Rehmet and Hikmet, the older brothers, are in their senior school years and work after school.

Rehmet tutors school children and Hikemt works in a grocery store. Fikret and Kiraz are young and go to school. Ismet is Filiz’s youngest sibling and stays home with Filiz.

The story is not merely about a dysfunctional destitute family in Istanbul but also a love story or a triangle love story between Filiz, Barish, and Jamil. Barish is a medical intern and belongs to a gangster family. Jamil is a police officer who lives in the same neighbourhood as Filiz and is secretly in love with Filiz. Qesay Maa moves around Filiz, her responsibilities towards her siblings, her struggles, and sacrifices to keep her family happy and together, and her Complex love life. It is difficult to say if the family or families portrayed in this soap opera are Muslims as there are no visible clues.

To get familiarized with the characters in Qesay Maa discussed throughout the thesis, Table 3 displays the names and characteristics of each character. For a detailed explanation of each character with an image, refer to Appendix (G).

Table 3

Demographics of characters in Qesay Maa

	Name	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Occupation
1	Filiz	20-25	Female	Single	Unknown
2	Shayma	30-40	Female	Divorced	Homemaker
3	Tulay	25-35	Female	Married	Homemaker
4	Mujdeh	14-17	Female	Single	Student
5	Muzeh	14-17	Female	Single	Student
6	Esra	30-35	Female	Married	Works at her husband’s grocery store
7	Kiraz	7-10	Female	Single	Student
8	Barish	24-28	Male	Single	Medical Intern
9	Jamil	25-30	Male	Single	Police Officer
10	Fikri	40-65	Male	Married	Unemployed
11	Tufan	35-40	Male	Married	Owner of a Café

12	Rehmet	15-18	Male	Single	Student & tutor
13	Hikmet	14-17	Male	Single	Student & Works at grocery store
14	Fikret	7-10	Male	Single	Student

Episode one. This episode is about Rahmet and Hikmet getting into an unexpected problem that results in Barish and Jamil's deal forcing Barish to leave the town. Child Services arrive to check on Filiz and her siblings and take the younger siblings away.

Episode two. Filiz has to prove to the Child Services that her parents live with them. However, their father, Fikri, is missing, and Barish is nowhere to help them. Rehmet asks Shayma to pretend to be their mother during the Child Services officers' visit. Child Services decides to take the children away. Filiz finds a way to deal with the situation.

Episode three. Filiz still cannot find Barish. Filiz and Jamil get engaged to get children's custody. Barish finds out and comes back to help Filiz. Barish tells Filiz about his and Jamil's deal. Court orders that Filiz and Jamil cannot take custody until they are officially married.

Episode four. It is Filiz and Jamil's wedding ceremony, and Filiz goes missing from the ceremony. Barish kidnaps Filiz and takes her out of town. Jamil is looking for them. Filiz's mother, Shukran, is back and brings children back home.

The mentioned characters in Table 2 and 3 from both the soap operas are discussed in the analysis based on their centrality to the plotlines of the soap operas, which helps in answering one of the broader research questions guiding this study, focusing on how gender relations are represented in transnational soap operas in Afghan media.

Findings and Analysis

In the above, I provided a summary of the stories of studied Turkish soap operas and the characters they portray. Now, I turn towards events within the soap operas to discuss the themes.

The findings are divided into two major themes and twelve sub-themes. The first theme includes nine sub-themes that discuss the representations of gender relations in the selected soap operas. The second theme includes three sub-themes, presents findings on representations of social relations and how relationships are portrayed in three sub-themes.

Representations of Gender Relations

Gender is an important theme that is central in almost every scene of both soap operas. Gender, as defined in the literature review section, is a social construct. Gender is performance and a set of acts (Butler, 1990). Focusing on gender and gender relations issues allows understanding the inequalities in a society based on gender identity. Gender relations are visible when people talk, express their emotions, socialize, and the roles they perform.

Similarly, Gunter (1995) and Manstead and McCulloch (1981) argue that television advertisements present romanticized images of appropriate behaviours and roles for men and women by assigning certain behaviours to women as part of their femininity, and specific behaviours to men to demonstrate their masculinity. Content analysis of both the soap operas – Paiman and Qesay Maa – found that gender relations are often represented in conventional and traditional manners. There is a maintained distinction between female and male characteristics and their roles.

Emotional vs rational. The study found that female characters are often portrayed as emotional and hopeless compared to male characters. Female characters are often kind, calm, and caring, while male characters are often portrayed as rational and vocal. For instance, Filiz, in Qesay Maa, is almost always in an emotional state of being. Her emotions are displayed as worrying for others, feeling helpless, or crying; her lively scenes are short-lived. When she is stressed, she often says, “I do not know what to do.” Filiz is almost always portrayed as hopeless

and lost. Additionally, In Paiman, in a situation where the police arrest Hulya, her mother-in-law, Suhaila, and sister-in-law, Zainab, express their feelings:

Suhaila: We cannot be happy, even a day.

Zainab: Oh, God, I am going crazy. Father [referring to Bairam], why did the police arrest Hulya?

Suhaila: God knows what is happening there.

Bairam: Stop these *Gapai Zanana*⁵, you both.

Suhaila: I wish you had gone with them, Mr. Bairam.

Bairam: Have patience, Suhaila. Why are you stressing so much? I sent the lawyer to take care of everything. We will know about all in a while.

Bairam's statement of "stop your *Gapai Zanana*" indicates that stressing out and expressing emotions are behavioural traits associated with females, while rationality is associated with males. He might be worried, but he shows rational thinking and thinks about solving the problem instead of displaying emotions of stress and worry.

Additionally, male characters are not expected to express their emotions of love, affection, or care. For instance, when Karim proposes Hulya:

Karim: ... in these two years, I have really fallen in love with you.

Hulya: You are very kind [she is surprised]. Hearing you say things like this is strange to me. Similarly, when in a family gathering, Nila tries to be close to her partner Atif and tries to hold his hand. Atif pulls his hand and looks at everyone making sure no one is looking at them. He displayed a sense of embarrassment and shame for holding hands in front of others.

Selfless vs self-interest. The content analysis of the episodes also found that female characters are often portrayed as selfless beings who place others' needs, wishes, and comfort

⁵ *Gapai Zanana* is literally translated as 'woman talk' that refers to an irrational, over-emotional, and naïve way of talking about something.

before their own. They are almost always ready to sacrifice their happiness, desires, and comfort for others. While male characters often think about themselves before others and are more self-regarding compared to female characters. For example, when Filiz finds out that she can bring her siblings back from the Child Protection facility and take their custody and guardianship by getting married, she decides to marry Jamil. Although she does not love him or want to be with him, she decides to sacrifice her comfort selflessly for her family.

Similarly, in Paiman, Bairam cheats on Suhaila twice, but every time Suhaila gets back with Bairam for her children's *happiness* and not her dignity. The notion of women being nurturing, comforting, and thinking about others before self, renders women invisible, and their existence is merely to serve others.

On the other hand, male characters are portrayed as less selfless and more self-interested. Jamil knows about Filiz and Barish's relationship and Filiz's circumstances, but he favours his desires over Filiz's and, by any means, wants Filiz in his life. Moreover, Jamil's mother does not favour Jamil getting married to Filiz, but he ignores what his mother or others want or think and focuses more on his wishes. Similarly, Barish sees his mother's disagreement with his relationship with Filiz, but he leaves them behind to follow his love for Filiz.

Domestic vs professional. Studies have found that women are often portrayed in the media having lower-level professions with shorter career spans, more concerned about their looks and family (Ottosson & Cheng, 2012). Qesay Maa cultivates such representations of female characters by portraying them more often at home talking, caring for children, doing house chores, and almost always being concerned about housekeeping activities. For instance, Shayma's character in Qesay Maa is almost always seen inside the house. She is always at home, busy cleaning and cooking. Similarly, in Paiman female characters such as Suhaila, Bada, and Khadija are often

portrayed inside the house. However, male characters are less often seen at home and more often at outdoor settings or in the office and workstations.

Furthermore, while at home, male characters seek comfort; however, female characters plan and perform domestic activities. For instance, in a scene, Karim and Hulya are having breakfast; Karim, while leaving for work, tells Hulya, “anyways I am leaving you also get your work done.” By work, he means cooking, preparing food, other domestic chores.

Moreover, Paiman has seven female characters and six male characters, and Qesay Maa has six females and six male characters (see Table 2 and 3) frequently portrayed in the four analyzed episodes. The number of male and female characters are almost equal in both the soap operas. However, the number of female characters working and having professions is significantly lower than male characters. On the contrary, most male characters in both soap operas are either employed or own a business. However, female characters are mostly homemakers, or their professions or work is unknown.

Additionally, male characters are portrayed as more career-focused compared to female characters. For instance, Karim in Paiman is planning to build a university, and Husain is a successful business owner, while Hulya and Zainab’s professions are unknown. They are either at home or a restaurant, busy gossiping, and other female characters are portrayed as homemakers. Likewise, in Qesay Maa, Jamil is a police officer, Barish is a medical intern, and Rehman and Hekmat also work. On the contrary, Tulay and Shayma are homemakers, and Filiz is often busy taking care of her siblings. However, when Filiz finds a job, as required for her sibling’s custody case, she would not show up at her work, since she is more focused on personal and family issues. Stressing more on personal and family life emphasizes the lack of importance placed on female characters’ careers.

Likewise, van Zoonen (1994) and Wood (2015) argue that women in media are usually presented as young and beautiful but not very well educated. The findings of this study reveal similar conclusions. There was no discussion or mention of any female characters' education level or intelligence in the watched episodes. There is a scene where Hulya remembers when she got admission to the university and how she was not happy about it. At that time, her concerns were how she would continue her education without money and mainly how she would afford new outfits that she would require for going to the University. While male characters' intelligence is not only discussed but visually demonstrated. For instance, Rehmet is so *smart* that he takes exams for higher-grade students in return for money. His teacher finds out, and instead of indicting him for the fraud, the teacher tells his sister, Filiz, that he is intelligent, and he can help him get into the university, but he should stop getting involved in fraud. Moreover, male characters are professionals, such as police officers and business owners, which indicate of their *smartness* and intelligence. While female characters' professions are often unknown, and the female characters, such as lawyers or doctors, are short-lived characters.

Furthermore, female characters are more concerned about their and other women's looks compared to male characters. For example, in Paiman, Zainab is pregnant, and since she finds out about her pregnancy, her concerns about her weight and overall looks increase. In one of the scenes when Zainab meets Hulya at Kaya's coffee shop, she tells Hulya, "oh, sister-in-law. My appetite is increasing. I am concerned about my weight gain." Likewise, in another episode, when Hulya is having a gathering with other female friends, Zainab says, "I think I need to recheck my weight. I mean, I have to, now." Such portrayals reinforce the stereotypical idea that women always need to be concerned about their looks and maintain constructed beauty standards while men focus on work and career.

Saviour vs victim. Additionally, the study also found that male characters are often portrayed as the saviours and protectors of their female counterparts. When a child protection officer visits Filiz and her siblings to evaluate their living situation, Filiz tries to convince the officer that things are sound, and they live with their parents. The officer does not seem to be convinced by Filiz; however, when Jamil arrives, he easily controls the situation:

Jamil: Hello officer, I am Jamil, a police officer. May I talk to you outside?

Officer: Yes, sure.

Jamil: I understand you are trying to do your job, but there seems to be a misunderstanding. I know this family for a long time, we are neighbours, and their parents live with them. I am the witness.

Officer: How can I believe it? I did not see the parents! They are nowhere.

Filiz: Yes, they are not here now.

Jamil: I know the family. They might be poor, but they are very close to each other. Filiz takes care of her brothers and sister very well. Whoever gave you this information was wrong.

Officer: Yes, such things happen sometimes. People call us with wrong information. I am leaving now, but I will come back to check on them and make sure everything is going well and meet their parents.

Similarly, when Filiz's siblings are taken to foster care, her lawyer advises her on getting back her siblings:

The lawyer: I understand that in your case, your parents are not here, and someone who can legally take care of you all should be there.

Filiz: Someone?

Lawyer: Yes, someone who can take all the responsibilities. Do you have any relatives who can?

Rehmet: We do not!

Filiz: Can't I be that person?

Lawyer: It is not easy. You are young with no job, and you are single.

Filiz: If I get married, will that work?

Lawyer: Yes, it would. Even if you do not have a job, your husband's salary and insurance would be enough.

Additionally, when Filiz has to find a job to get her siblings custody and guardianship, Barish secretly helps her. She finds a job in her first interview where she is not asked any questions about her experience or qualification but just informed that she is appointed. The job is granted to her not based on her qualifications and abilities but rather Barish's recommendation. After appointing Filiz, the company owner calls Barish to inform him about Filiz's appointment. Barish orders the company head not to assign Filiz *much* work and be flexible with her timing. If she asks for a day off, it should not be a problem.

This whole setting makes Barish Filiz's saviour from the chaos by helping her being employed and takes away Filiz's agency. She is portrayed as a passive victim and incompetent without a man. Furthermore, there is a constant reinforcement of the notion that a woman cannot achieve anything and take control of a situation without a man. For a woman to succeed, resolve a problem or be safe, she needs a man.

Likewise, Khadija, Bairam's sister, is portrayed as a devil like, jealous, and a begrudging person. She always taunts others and tries to find flaws in others' lives. Bairam shames her by saying, "everyone will get married, but you will stay like this [unmarried]." It reinforces the idea that the primary need of a woman is to be married and have a male companion in her life, and female characters who are hysterical due to jealousy are struggling to obtain someone or something in life. The reason for their *devil-like* character is the lack of men in their life.

Naïve vs aware. Furthermore, the study's findings also demonstrate that female characters are often portrayed as naïve and immature – childlike. They are less aware of their surroundings and, therefore, male characters who are more aware and mature and take control. For instance, in one of the scenes in Paiman, Kaya and Maher stop Jeena's boyfriend and question him to

determine whether he is *good enough* for Jeena. Jeena is watching them from the back and says, “My God! as if I am going to marry this man. What kind of interrogation is going on?” Jeena is not asked or even informed by her male friends that they will *make sure* she is dating the *right* person. This idea underlines the impression that women are immature and unable to decide and know what is right for them. Therefore, a man’s intervention is essential to *make sure* everything is *okay*.

Similarly, in Qesay Maa, Filiz trusts Jamil and seeks help from him. Despite everyone’s concerns and lack of trust in Jamil, she is the only person who trusts him. Everyone is aware of Jamil’s intentions, except for Filiz. It depicts how unaware Filiz is about her surroundings and the people around her.

Likewise, In Paiman, when Hulya gets arrested by police on a murder case, Karim, who is at the police station and concerned, tells Husain:

Karim: How can we get over all these absurdities of Hulya, brother.

Husain: Stop judging her. Let them finish, and we will find out about everything.

Karim: What are we supposed to find out? Now when she comes back, she will be all lying about everything.

Hulya is portrayed as an immature, childlike woman who is not aware of her actions’ consequences. In the scene where Hulya is back from police interrogation, Karim and Hulya are in the bedroom having a conversation about the incident:

Hulya: My love. I know you are upset. I know all this happened at a very wrong time.

Karim: Hulya, I do not want to talk about it.

Hulya: But dear, when I was going to Jabar, I did not realize it. Brother Husain also went to him. Brother Husain went to him looking for us. I did not know all this will happen when I went to him. I am honest. If you want, we can postpone the wedding ceremony since you are looking at me right now seems you want to divorce me, not get married to me.

Female characters' depiction as childlike furthers the idea that women are uninformed and unaware of the consequences of their actions and enforces that women are inferior to men, and it is acceptable for men to discipline women.

Dominant vs submissive. The study's findings also found that female characters are more submissive towards the family and ones they love. For instance, Filiz never confronts her father, an alcohol addict and irresponsible towards her siblings and herself. In the situation when Filiz needs to prove to the Child Protection Services that she has a functioning family, she requests her father, Fikri, to help by being sober and present during the Child Protection officers' visit. Fikri seems unaffected, and his response makes Filiz furious. Although Filiz is angry, which is visible from her facial expressions, she still controls herself and tells her father in a calm tone, "baba for once listen to me and do something for us. I need you." However, in a somehow similar situation where Barish requests some money from his mother, and she questions him if he needs the money for Filiz, calling her *that girl*, rages Barish, and he tells his mother, "I do not need your money" and tries to leave. However, his mother stops him and submits to him and transfers the money to his account. In both, the scenes women submit to men, while men demonstrate obstinacy and persistence.

Furthermore, male characters are often found to practice dominance and authority. Karim often orders Hulya around. For example, he is found as saying, "I am going to take a shower, you also do your work [he refers to dinner preparation]" or when he proposes Hulya, he tells her, "you are not going to say no, right? Listen, if you are saying no, there are many stones here, I will break your head." He laughs, and everyone laughs with him. Hulya responds, "yes, yes, yes!" In this scene, Karim practices dominance, Hulya submits, and violence against women is humorized.

Similarly, in the last watched episode of *Qesay Maa*, Barish kidnaps Filiz from her and Jamil's wedding ceremony. He brings her to his cottage out of the town. He ties her hands while she is unconscious. When Filiz gets conscious, she tries to escape, and Barish follows her. To prevent Filiz from leaving, he pretends to get into a minor accident and being in pain, which works. Filiz, who has strong mindedly decided to return to the town, now stays back to take care of Barish, ignoring that he kidnapped her and kept her against her will. Furthermore, violence against women is legitimized as an act of *love*. It is an act of normalizing violence and abuse against women.

Female characters are often seen submitting to male characters and family members and scarifying their desires and comforts in numerous scenes throughout the episodes. While male characters practice dominance in different ways, be it kidnapping for *love*, ordering to perform a task, or humorously making women say *yes* to men's proposals; power and dominance are practiced in toxic ways by male characters.

Objectification. The findings of the study also demonstrate that women are objectified in several ways. Female characters are objectified as property owned by men, as nameless subjects associated with men, or referred to by a beauty denotation, and as sexual objects.

Female characters are often portrayed as a love interest of male characters and to be owned by them. In both the series, two men fight over their exclusive right to objectify a woman. In *Qesay Maa*, Barish and Jamil are in a constant verbal fight to *win* Filiz until they get into a physical fight. It is likely a demonstration of the brazen practice of toxic masculinity, entitlement, and objectification of women. Similarly, in *Paiman*, Bairam unabashedly tells his story of how he took revenge from Saleh by getting engaged with Amina, the woman both men wanted, and how he exchanged her for a business deal. Bairam tells the story to his sons:

Bairam: Saleh had invented a tool that identified mining extraction fields. I asked him to give me the tool, and I will pay him as much money as he wants, but Saleh rejected my offer. I got angry, and I sent a proposal to Amin's family for marriage, and we got engaged.

Karim: Are you talking about Hulya's mother?

Bairam: yes, yes. That poor woman whom Saleh beat every day. He was a stupid man.

Husain: You ruined all his dreams.

Bairam: I bettered his life. When I was young, I was powerful, like a lion. I also told him that if he gives me the tool, I will leave Amina and go far from the village and pay him money. He accepted, and I got the tool and took forward my business.

It is a portrayal of hegemonic masculinity and agency-less femininity. Bairam unapologetically explains how he took revenge from Saleh by exercising his power that makes him more masculine than Saleh. Moreover, by exchanging a woman for a tool denotes that women are merely objects to be owned and won by men. Their agency and subjectivity are eliminated. Women cannot decide for themselves as agency-less subjects.

Likewise, in Paiman, the entire family comes together to redo Hulya and Karim's proposal ceremony, in *Dari Khastgary*, a ritual where the boy's family asks for the girl's family for her.

Bairam: With God's demand and his Messenger's say, I want your beautiful daughter Hulya for my handsome son...

Kaya: ...Ok, I give you our daughter.

Representations of gender, as such, are problematic in the sense that men making decisions for women takes away women's autonomy to obtain information and make decisions about their life events. Moreover, a woman is described as an object that is passed on from one man to another.

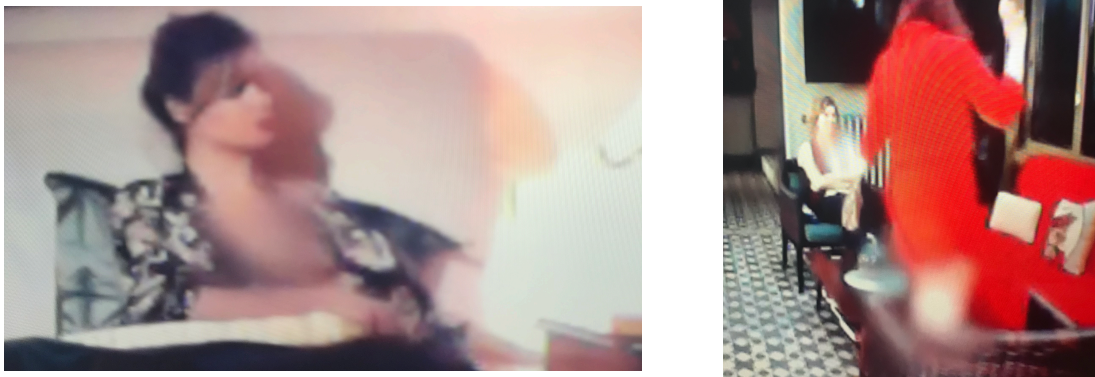
Furthermore, the study found that female characters are often referred to through their association or relationship with their male counterparts. For example, "Husain's mother," "my daughter." Female characters are often not called by their names but by a beauty label such as, "my princess," "my beautiful girl." At times they are referred to as nameless subjects such as "that

girl.” Name is an essential part of a person’s identity; by taking it away, female characters are reduced to invisible and invaluable subjects whose visibility and value are defined in association with others.

Furthermore, due to constant rage and pressure from the government and religious authorities, the television networks started self-censoring the programs’ content, mainly imported content. As Osman (2011) notes, Tolo TV and Ariana Television Network began the self-censoring approach after their years-long fight with religious power holders. They censor the content of soap operas imported from India by “blurring, fading and re-editing any ‘inappropriate’ exposed parts of women’s bodies” (Osman, 2011, p. 243) that includes legs, arms, and waist.

In the Turkish series that portrays the Turkish lifestyle, female characters dress in diverse ways; some female characters wear head scarfs, and others wear short and sleeveless dresses with bare legs and arms. Television networks blur and fade exposed parts of women’s bodies to avoid backlash from religious authorities as displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

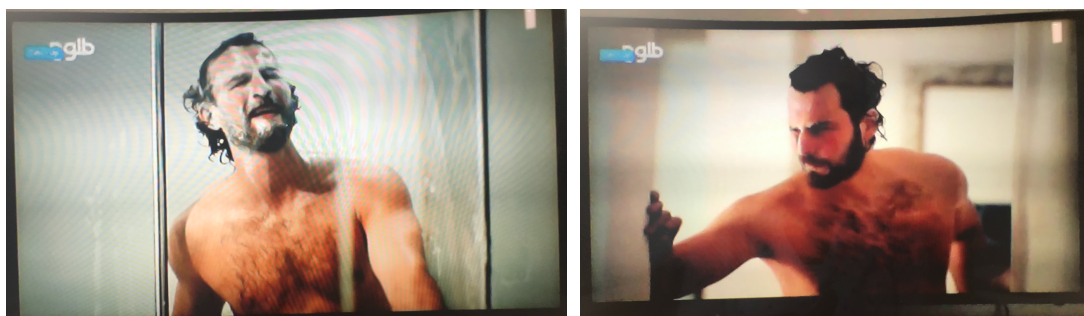


Source: the images display faded and blurred parts of women’s bodies as censorship. Photographed from the screen by author in 2018 during data collection

In fading and blurring women’s images, the purpose is to avoid showing women’s bodies, which is considered inappropriate. However, it can be argued that fading uncovered parts of women’s bodies are also a form of sexual objectification of women. Nevertheless, the notion of

sexual objectification is different from how it is defined and understood in Western media. In the West, women's bodies are displayed for the male gaze (Mulvey, 1999). In Afghanistan's case, by censoring women's body parts in the media, the woman's body is *protected* from the gaze. The argument I want to make here is that it is not *protection* but rather what I term as covert sexual objectification. By hiding and censoring women's bodies, the notion of women's objectification is not challenged; rather, it is further reinforced.

Since this censorship merely applies to women's bodies, male characters' legs, arms, and even the entire upper body is boldly displayed without being blurred. For instance, in one of the Figure 3



Source: the images display man's body is not censored. Photographed from the screen by author in 2018 during data collection

episodes in Paiman, Karim comes out of the bathroom, shouting and asking Hulya why the water supply stopped. His entire upper body is exposed, as seen in Figure 2, and it is not blurred.

This distinction in the portrayal of women's bodies versus men's bodies reinforces the notion that women are merely sex objects and body parts, while men are beyond some parts of the body; they have a bigger purpose. Similarly, as Cuklanz (2016) argues,

...the function of male nudity is understood as quite differently motivated than that of female nudity. Whereas women's nudity is usually sexually motivated within the text and is aimed primarily at visual pleasure, male nudity is not normally sexually motivated, but rather requires an alibi. Male's nudity in films displays the physical power and effective action. (p. 8)

One can also argue that censoring women's bodies, as seen in Figure 1, is desexualisation of women's bodies and sexualities. Nevertheless, we should ask, is it unproblematic to desexualize women? Does desexualisation affect women's understandings of their sexuality, in general, sexual health? Does desexualizing women, through censorships, imply that a woman's body is fragile, and men cannot control their sexual impulses? The notion of protecting women's bodies from the male gaze by censoring is simply discussing male sexuality rather than female sexuality.

Unrepresentable(s). It is worth mentioning that while watching the soap operas, no transsexual, transgender, or gender non-binary persons were seen in the story. In fact, in a conversation scene in Paiman, between Karim and Hulya, when they talk about Maher and Karim's bonding, they indirectly express their implausibility towards non-binary individuals.

Hulya: So how did your [counselling] session go tell me.

Karim: It was great and went great.

Hulya: Good. I am glad.

Karim: I sat with Maher for a while and chatted.

Hulya strangely says, 'about what?'

Karim: I did not know how close he is to me. I mean, how honest he is to me.

Hulya is talking to herself, 'Forgive me, God!'

She asks Karim, 'I didn't understand it. Can you be more precise?'

Karim: Therapy is perfect for a person. You get a chance to say everything you have in heart.

You dig a hole, and you see what comes out of that hole. It is quite interesting.

Hulya is again talking to herself, "Oh God, I am going to go crazy. Is it that Karim is in love with Maher now? Ohh Nooo! Do not talk stupid, Hulya, be patient. The stupid man is annoying me."

Hulya says to Karim, "dear Karim, listen, I know you are annoying me, so stop. Or I am will make you regret it."

Hulya mumbling, "He is saying [Maher] is close to me so shamelessly. God, forgive me!"

This whole scenario is a portrayal of homophobic behaviour. Hulya's facial expressions demonstrated the denunciation and unacceptability of homosexuality.

Furthermore, all the characters in the analyzed episodes are able-bodied persons, and there is no representation of persons with disabilities. The absence of persons with disabilities and the LGBTQA+ community in the media imposes an ableist and heteronormative idea and ignores the diversity and differences among people.

Furthermore, almost all the characters are in so-called *perfect* shape. All the characters are thin, particularly female characters; there is a lack of diversity in body shapes. However, among male characters, one can see diverse body shapes, especially among elderly characters. Lack of representations of different body shaped women is the enforcement of the *perfect body shape ideology* and standardizing women into constructed beauty ideals, which is far from ordinary women's lives.

Barriers broken but not demolished. It is worth mentioning that both the soap operas touch on some sensitive issues such as divorce, love affair between older female and young male, portraying men often with children, and strong and active female characters. For instance, Suhaila, after knowing about Bairam's extra-marital relationship, strong mindedly demands a divorce. However, through the storyline, the topic of divorce disappears, and she forgets and forgives Bairam. A sensitive issue like women seeking divorce is represented; however, the discussion loses importance as other stories dominate it.

Furthermore, some female characters are portrayed as strong and active individuals. For example, Filiz is supposed to be seen as a strong woman who is not scared of taking responsibility solely. However, with Barish entering her life, her strength somehow transforms into dependency and emotionality. Moreover, Filiz's strong-mindedness is visible in her decision of not marrying

Barish but Jamil. She decides not to go back to Barish as he abandoned her. However, is getting married the only choice for Filiz to be able to live with her siblings? Filiz's strong-mindedness and assertive personality fade away, and focus moves to the choices she has to make for *others*.

Similarly, Hulya is portrayed as an active and lively female character. She achieves what she desires. However, her character is perceived more as immature and naïve. Her immaturity and gullibility take over her active and lively character. Additionally, in Paiman male characters are more often seen with children than female characters. However, they are less seen talking or performing childcare such as feeding, bathing, or putting children to sleep.

Moreover, there is also a portrayal of either one-sided love affair between an older female and a younger male character, unlikely to be seen. It can be interpreted as challenging the traditional heterosexual relations between an older man and a young woman. However, as the story progresses, the male character's love interest seems to shift to a younger female character.

The findings demonstrate that both the soap operas bring unconventional topics into the story. However, they are neither fully developed nor dominated by the status quo and follow the dominant social narratives that stand on patriarchal values. Despite the efforts portraying strong female characters and raising unconventional issues, there is still the tendency to portray them through the lens of dominant cultural stereotypes. Although some female characters, particularly lead characters' portrayal does involve an element of social change such as freedom of making choices, living life as desired, and independence; instead of reflecting on the elements of social change, the roles often end up reflecting the stereotypical views and patriarchal status quo.

Furthermore, male characters do express emotions but not in the same way as female characters. Male characters express their emotions by talking about them, while women's emotions are associated with crying and keeping it to self. In the analyzed soap operas, some men value

family, display affection to their partners, and love for their children. However, they are still the dominant figure in the relationship. There is a lack of display of an equal partnership in female and male relationships.

Representations of Social Relations

This theme discusses how social relations are represented in *Paiman* and *Qesay Maa*. As mentioned earlier, gender is a social construct that also involves social relations through which power relations exist. Social relations include relationships between spouses, parents and children, siblings, lovers, friends, employers and employees. The study's findings indicate some differences and similarities in the way relationships are portrayed between female and male characters, among female characters, and among male characters.

Relationships between female and male characters. Gender power relations often include masculinity verse femininity, historically and culturally constructed through gender roles. According to Kabeer (1999), "one way of thinking about power is the ability of making choices" (p. 436). Considering the notion of choice and making choices, the study's findings indicate that female characters often lack choice. There are rarely any possible alternatives for them to choose from. For instance, in *Qesay Maa*, Filiz can only choose to get married in order to be able to obtain her siblings custody. Likewise, in *Piaman*, Zainab decides to remarry Husain because she found out that she is pregnant, which likely indicates that she cannot find any other way but to choose to remarry her ex-husband, who cheated on her. It can be argued that these female characters still make *choices*, but are these choices reinforcement of their empowerment or subordination? As Kabeer (1999) argues, power relations are not practiced merely by agency and choices but also through the kinds of choices being made. The choices made by Filiz and Zainab do not

demonstrate their power but rather their submission to the circumstances and lack of alternative options.

Furthermore, power is exercised in different ways; for example, in a scene in Paiman, Husain tells Karim:

Husain: Tomorrow night. We will go out together.

Karim: No, brother, I cannot come. Some problems are going on between Hulya and I. Karim: We just sit, chat, and eat together. If you want, I can ask Hulya for her permission.

Karim: What permission, brother! Ok, ok! Fine, we will go.

Husain: What if your wife got angry? (sarcastically)

Karim: It's okay, brother, you convince Zainab, I will convince Hulya.

Husain: No, I will call and ask for her permission so that there is no issue later. Wait.....

Husain is calling Hulya.

Husain: ... Listen, I was saying tomorrow I want to be with my brother Karim if you permit.

Hulya: (laughs) oh Husain brother. Why are you asking for my permission? You both can go. It is undesirable for a man to ask for his wife/partner's permission since it questions his agency, autonomy, masculinity, and capability of making decisions. at the same time, it is not only acceptable but very normal if a woman asks a man for his permission. In the patriarchal society, women are expected to seek their male counterparts' permission for almost everything. It is very evident in Afghan society too.

Relationships among female characters. The study also found that female characters' relationships are often based on jealousy, hatred, and shaming. For instance, when Karim proposes Hulya, Nila, who is watching them from the balcony with other family members, thinking and talking to herself, says, "he did not make a simple proposal. As I can see, the ring also looks expensive." Her expressions demonstrate a sense of jealousy. While other family members are cheering and being happy for them, Nila does not seem happy about everything.

Similarly, when Zainab asks Hulya to allow her to be part of her unknown missions, Hulya says:

Hulya: Zainab is not fully ready and needs to learn a lot.

Maher: No, she is okay.

Zainab: Hulya does not want anyone to work with Maher; that is why.

Maher: Yes, because she is jealous.

Likewise, when Hikemt comes to meet Rehemt at his school, Rehmet tells Muzee and Mujde that he and his brother are meeting after some time and have a lot to talk about, so they want to be alone. Muzee says, "of course." Rehmat looks at Mujde and says, "See, this is how you should be; learn from her."

The findings also show that the sense of jealousy is often constructed and fabricated among women by male characters either by comparing two women, telling women "you are jealous," or asking them, "are you jealous?"

Additionally, the findings also indicate a sense of hatred among female characters with no specific or a rational reason. For example, Barish's mother does not like Filiz because she is her son's love interest. Nevertheless, she does not dislike her son for liking Filiz. When Barish goes missing, his mother comes to Filiz looking for him and blaming Filiz for her son being missing.

The mother: It is all because of you.

Filiz: because of me?

The mother: Yes, you came into his life from nowhere. I warned him that it was too much for him to handle, but he did not listen. Now he ran away.

Similarly, in Paiman, Khadija and Suhaila, who are sisters in law, never get along with each other and continuously taunt each other or plot against each other to teach one another lessons.

Moreover, female characters are often seen shaming each other. For instance, when Filiz meets Jamil's mother on Jamil's insistence, his mother, shaming Filiz, tells her, "I heard you were engaged to someone else previously." Relatedly, when Nila tells Arda that his mother is trying to move on and, therefore, seeing someone, which shocks Arda and Atif. Nila responds, "wait, wait. Why are you both talking and looking at me like this? Like if I have been going out with strange men."

However, it is worth mentioning that female characters support and stand by each other in some situations. For instance, in *Qesay Maa*, the bonding between Filiz and her friend Tulay is very strong. They always support each other. Similarly, in *Paiman*, Zainab and Hulya's relationship with one another and their mother-in-law, contrary to traditional presumption, is very strong.

Relationships among male characters. The relationships among male characters are portrayed in very diverse ways. There are situations where male characters get aggressive with each other, and there are also situations when they show support and care for one another. The bonding between the brothers Karim and Husain, and Hikmet and Rehmet is portrayed as very strong. They are always there for each other. Rehmet and Hikmet have a good bonding with Barish. However, they do not like Jamil. Despite not liking Jamil, that dislike is not displayed as apparent as it is among female characters. Often there is a reason behind a conflict or a bond among male counterparts. For instance, the reason for Jamil and Barish's conflict is Filiz. They are in a constant fight over Filiz. Although their conflict is problematic in the sense that it objectifies women, there is a cause that explains the conflict between two men, unlike the unknown hatred and jealousy displayed between women.

Chapter Six

Viewers' Perceptions

The second primary objective of the study is to understand viewers' perceptions regarding the representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas. This chapter discusses the findings of focus group discussions with both female and male participants. Extended and paraphrased quotes from the focus group discussions have been used throughout the chapter to present major patterns in responses.

The focus group discussions analysis demonstrates some differences and similarities in how female and male participants perceive representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas on Afghan television stations. Both female and male participants criticize gender relations in transnational soap operas; however, some dissimilarities exist in their disapprovals. Furthermore, the findings of focus group discussions, the originated themes that emerged during data analysis, demonstrate that female and male participants often decode media content differently. While some aspects of the problematization of the content of soap operas are similar among both men and women, their interpretations are different regarding representations of gender relations and gender equality.

I analyzed participants decoding process using Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding theory, focusing on three viewing positions in the decoding process: dominant or hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional viewing, discussed in detail in chapter four.

Active Audience and Multiple Meanings

As discussed in the literature review section, studies have argued that audiences are not merely passive receivers of information from the media; instead, they are active meaning-makers. Additionally, different audience members derive different meanings from the same text or media

content. The findings of this study indicate similar outcomes. Participants' responses demonstrate differences in their interpretations of soap opera text concerning the portrayal of gender relations.

During the discussion on soap operas and their role in shaping viewers' perspectives, participants demonstrate diverse viewpoints. Some participants believe that soap operas could be a negative influence on society. For instance, a male participant indicates:

For example, in these Turkish soap operas, you see a girl marries a boy, then [she] divorces him [and] gets married to another man and again divorces him. This is how it is, right! (*looking at other participants for verification*) Here these soap operas have caused many family issues. As we say, they have made people *Chashem Para* [shameless].

Similarly, when female participants were asked about the role of media in shaping audiences' views, a female participant states that she also believes the adoption of negative characteristics from transnational soap operas is more prevalent among people than the adoption of the positive aspect. However, she also stated that "the reason for showing a negative thing is for people to learn from it."

Similarly, while discussing the ways female characters dress in these transnational soap operas, participants shared different perspectives. For instance, for some participants, the multiplicity of ways soap operas' female characters dressed reflects diversity and freedom of choice. It is a cultural difference between Turkey and Afghanistan and is inapplicable and unacceptable in Afghan society for other participants. For instance, one of the male participants share,

Despite Turkey being an Islamic country, the different traditions and customs we have [in Afghanistan] are very different from [Turkey]. For example, freedom is given to women [in Turkey], or how [women and men] dress is very different.

While on the contrary, another female participant, on the same topic, mentions,

Even if they are Muslims, there is no condition imposed that they all should be the same. For example, in Afghanistan, it is emphasized that a woman should wear a scarf or *Chadari* [the head-to-toe cover] [while in public] or should not leave the house without Hijab. However, in [Turkish] soap operas, one person wears Hijab and the other moves around freely. Everyone lives their life the way they want.

The findings point that audiences do not interpret and receive media text in similar ways. Their ways of understanding and analyzing media text varies significantly.

The findings also demonstrate that viewers are actively engaged with media texts, and they are selective in their viewing, which is a characteristic of active audiences. Viewers watch content on television for a reason and want to watch and listen to their preferred content. For example, while discussing the importance of media and reasons for likes and dislikes of soap operas, it is evident viewers make choices about what to watch and why to watch it. For instance, one of the female participants share,

I like entertainment programs... For me, it gives me pleasure and makes me happy and relaxes me instead of watching violent movies. Anyway, every day there is war and violence in Afghanistan (*laughter*). A person wants to escape from the situation one already is in...I do not particularly appreciate watching the news because there is always the same news in Afghanistan. Here this number of people are killed; there Taliban took over that province. There is not anything new that could attract you, so that you go and watch it.

Likewise, another female participant mentions,

I mostly like tourist shows and research series. Touristic shows because I think they motivate us, and a person needs the motivation to grow. Also, research series, because I like it because when you see something, you should not believe it right away but should investigate and research [it].

Similarly, another female participant discusses her interest in certain television shows and the reason as,

During the university days, I was very interested in political debates through Tolo News. It was very motivating in the sense that I wished one day to participate in such debates on television. It stimulated me a lot to know about what is happening around me, be a political leader like them, or know people around me. It encouraged me to start reading books and build my knowledge about politics to understand what they are saying, and I could apprehend it.

Additionally, the majority of the male participants see the importance of the media in the news; as one of the male participants share,

In terms of news, [media] are crucial. If we do not watch the news, we are unaware of anything happening in the world. So, in terms of news, they are essential.

Responses from the participants, both female and male, indicate that as active viewers, they selectively watch media content for different reasons, be it pleasure and entertainment, knowledge building, or obtaining information.

Interestingly, the focus group discussions also indicate that male participants see themselves as active viewers but consider female viewers passive receivers of media. Male participants frequently state that media's negative influence and particularly transnational soap operas are more on women. According to most male participants, female viewers adopt and apply what they call "negative aspects" of soap operas to their lives. For instance, one of the male participants state,

[Soap operas] influence family settings. For example, you see a man in a soap opera who works in an office and has an affair with his secretary. Now when an ordinary man goes to the office and comes home and his wife, who watches soap operas and has been influenced by them, will distrust her husband. If [the husband] gets a call from his boss during an unofficial time, and he leaves the room to talk to him, [the wife] will doubt him and be suspicious of him...

There are times when we go home late in the evening [after work]. When we leave work for home, it is already dark, but women do not understand them. They ask, where were you?

According to most of the male participants, female viewers are highly influenced by soap operas.

According to them, "they feel the same way," or "start feeling the same way" as female characters

in soap operas; however, female participants indicate otherwise. Some female participants even say they are “neutral” and “unaffected” by soap operas and women’s representations in soap operas. Furthermore, male participants categorize women with children, which illustrates the same pattern seen in the female representations in soap operas. Female characters are often portrayed as naïve, immature, childlike, and gullible. Male participants demonstrate a similar view about women in real life.

Participants’ responses further illustrate that they often take an oppositional viewing position, i.e., decoding the text in a contrary way as encoded (Hall, 1980); however, assume others are dominant or hegemonic readers, i.e., accepting the text as encoded. In other words, there is an assumption that *I am not influenced by the message, but others are*. For instance, a female participant states:

I know someone who is exactly like Farkhonda (*a character in a Turkish soap opera*) in that soap opera about five sisters, and she is the evil one among sisters. [the person] would follow [Farkhonda character], the way she dressed and put-on makeup.

Similarly, another female participant states,

Whoever watched Tulsi and Parvati (*characters from Indian soap operas*) wished to be like them and have the same level of patience as them (*laughter*), which was positive. Many [female viewers] built on their patience levels [watching Indian soap opera characters]. [The soaps operas] also had gossipy women characters, which also played a role [in female viewers’ life] (*laughter*). These soap opera characters also inspired some people, and they learned to gossip (*laughter*).

Some responses also indicate that audiences do look for or find similarities in real and reel life. For instance, a female participant states, “[soap operas] develop stories that can have a resemblance to life and society we live in” Adding to it, the participant further shares,

For instance, there is a soap opera that airs now called Qesay Maa. Their father is addicted to alcohol, and their mother has left them. Most of the people in Afghanistan have somehow similar life to [the soap opera].

The findings of the FGDs also indicate that viewers are active meaning-makers and continuously interact with the media content. Additionally, participants' responses illustrate that they are selective viewers; they pick and choose what and why to watch. Their selective viewership is not merely visible in the type of media content but also in the content and text itself.

Viewing Positions

As discussed in chapter four, Hall (1980) describes three types of viewing positions decoding or interpreting media text. Audiences, who are the decoders of media text, interpreted (decoded) media text by either accepting it as delivered (encoded) that demonstrates dominant or hegemonic viewing; demonstrate negotiating viewing by neither fully accepting nor rejecting the preferred reading of encoded meaning (Hall, 1980); or demonstrating oppositional viewing by entirely rejecting, resisting, and disagreeing with the encoded text (Hall, 1980).

Participants' interpretations of soap opera content reflected two viewing positions: negotiating and oppositional viewing. While demonstrating oppositional viewing, participants employ two types of oppositions: rejection for moral, cultural, and religious reasons and rejection for unrealistic and irrelevancy of content or texts. The negotiated viewing is seen in ways participants distance themselves from a text or critically view it.

Negotiated viewing. Responses from female participants illustrate that they see transnational soap operas or media content to understand different cultures. In this case, they look at foreign media content, soap operas, as a window to other cultures and societies, their way of life, and the practice of religion. For example, a female participant mentions,

Soap operas can increase the level of understanding of our people. they can also learn from them, their lifestyle changes, the way they dress and adopt the ethical aspects from [soap operas].

Female participants also indicate that they understand that foreign soap operas have less relevance and similarity to their culture. Hence, they are not impressionable victims of transnational culture. They are mindful of their cultural issues as Afghan women. For instance, a female participant states:

However, there are also some problematic aspects shown in the media. For instance, some of the programs aired do not consider moral attributes, which results in having adverse outcomes in developing societies like Afghanistan.

Female participants also indicate that female participants exercise negotiating viewing with *undesirable* media text and representations in these transnational soap operas. For example, while discussing the adoption of negative aspects in soap operas concerning women's treatment, a female participant argues that the malicious behaviour and issues portrayed in soap operas, mainly regarding maltreatment of women, deliver the message to the audience that doing so is wrong.

[Display of maltreatment of women in soap operas] is to show that this is wrong, and you should raise a voice and should stand against it. Neither are you superior to [man] nor is [man] superior to you.

Moreover, when asked how they see gender representations in transnational soap operas and how differently or similarly female and male characters are portrayed, respondents indicate that women are portrayed both as powerful and weak. A female participant further illustrates, "they show that there are women who can be leaders and powerful, and some who do not have opportunities and face violence. That is how they live." Adding to it, another female participant says,

Even if they see women in such a situation [weak and victims of violence], people can learn from that. Why should you have such a life?...

...When I see women like that, I tell myself, life is short, why should one live [a helpless life]?

Men as frequent oppositional viewers. As the encoding and decoding theory argues, the meaning is not a transparent univocal message delivered by the broadcaster and received by viewers but is dependent on the interpretations and reception of the audiences (Hall, 1980). In this case, female participants do not only reject the *disruptive* and *undesired* content but reverse it through the oppositional interpretation. They do not interpret female characters' suffering as *the way of life for women*, but rather as motivation to stand against violence and oppression. As Bobo (1995), in her study of black women as active viewers, argues, "although the film text is a patriarchal text, its black viewers' found ways to empower themselves through their negotiated reception of it." (p. 5).

However, male participants, on the contrary, reject transnational soap operas for their vibrant and vocal female characters. For example, a male participant states:

... our society is very traditional. A woman lives with her husband, whether he is the right person or bad. It remains the same till the end of life. Now what happens is that if the husband makes any small [mistake], the wife says I want a divorce. [Soap operas] have increased the percentage of divorce [in Afghan society].

Interestingly, female participants discuss the different representations of women in soap operas – weak, strong, rebellious – while male participants see female characters portrayed in soap operas merely as rebellious and dangerous. Male participants overlook the female characters that are portrayed as victims of abuse and violence. Perhaps, they see women suffering violence and oppression as *the way of life* for them?

Furthermore, the oppositional viewing process is also based on irrelevancy and unrealistic content and representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas. Participants frequently mention that they see less resemblance to their culture and issues portrayed in transnational soap operas, mainly Indian soap operas. The topic of cultural differences frequently came up in the discussions. Most participants agree that foreign content is irrelevant and does not represent issues

existing in their society. For example, a male participant indicates, “the biggest problem I think is the cultural differences.” Likewise, another male participant mentions,

Because women are seen as the second citizens, second sex, perhaps, [in Afghanistan], their simple decisions are not accepted, let the decisions that female characters take in these soap operas. For example, [in a foreign soap opera] a woman is shown in a relationship with more than one man. It might be acceptable to the [male character in soap opera]. For instance, he may decide to leave her; however, [in Afghan society] can result a woman’s death, and this is a major difference.

An important issue in the negotiated and oppositional viewing displayed by study participants is the rigid adherence of Afghan women to Afghan culture and Islamic values that male participants believe lack in Afghan female audiences.

Additionally, male participants do not display negotiating viewing. They more likely apply oppositional viewing and reject the content of transnational soap operas, fearing that after watching female characters in transnational soap operas, Afghan women will voice their needs and desire, resulting in deteriorating power and dominance men practice Afghan society and particularly on women. For example, a male participant states;

... when a [women] from a rural population, or less educated or uneducated watches [the transnational soap operas] cannot choose to adopt the positive aspects [shown in soap operas], which results in [woman’s] higher expectations [from her male counterpart] and [if] the male in the family is not able to accept their demands that creates conflict and problems in the family.

Male respondents’ responses demonstrate that they highly believe that women passively adopt the acts and behaviors displayed in transnational soap operas and apply in their lives. Male participants are more concerned about female viewers’ reactions towards their male counterparts after viewing rebellious and expressive female characters in transnational soap operas. The fear and concern that Afghan female audiences may passively adopt the acts and behaviors of expressive and vocal female characters in foreign soap operas can also be seen as a threat to masculine honor and

ghairat. Masculine honor, as defined by Saucier et al. (2015), is “the belief that aggression is sometimes justifiable and even necessary, such as when a man’s manhood, family, or romantic partner is insulted or threatened” (p. 13). *Ghairat*, similarly, is connected to the concepts of honor and respect and particularly to masculine honor and respect. *Ghiarat* connotes the protection of property, women, and land (*zan, zar, zamin*) (Waytt & Dunn, 2018). The protection of women also reflects controlling women to maintain *respect* since being *ba-ghairat* requires a “good name for a man’s female partner” (Vandella & Cohen, 2003, p. 998). Thus, male participants’ concern that women may passively adopt female characters’ behaviors in soap operas and become *uncontrollable* is an indication of losing respect in the community and being called *be-ghairat*. Being called *be-ghairat* is one of the biggest insults, particularly for men

Similarly, when asked about representations of gender relations in soap operas, all male participants agreed that they are often unrealistic and unacceptable, considering the Afghan society’s values. For instance, one of the male participants state,

One can say that [gender roles represented in transnational soap opera] are opposite to what is [in the Afghan society]. Women [in transnational soap operas] are key decision-makers, which can change an entire situation. They make decisions ..., perhaps for [the Turkish or Indian] society [shown in the transnational soap opera], it might not be offensive, but if here a woman reacts like [female characters in the transnational soap operas] it is unacceptable.

Agreeing to it, another male participant adds, “if a woman does the same as [female characters] do in soap operas, it will ruin the entire family system.”

Additionally, male participants did not discuss male characters’ representations in transnational soap operas; they mainly focused on female characters. Male participants’ oppositional viewing firmly focused on moral, religious, and cultural reasons. However, female participants demonstrate negotiating viewing by being critical of representations of both men and women and, at times, distancing themselves from those representations. However, male

participants express their concerns that children and women are not fully aware that soap operas are fictions. Female participants strongly express their awareness of the fictional nature of soap operas and transnational soap operas being foreign to their culture and circumstances. Therefore, they often merely watch soap operas for entertainment and pleasure, which can be translated as distancing themselves in the process of negational viewing.

Role of Gender in Audiences' Reception and Interpretation Process

Morley (1991) argues, there is a range of factors – age, sex, race, religion, education – that ought to be taken into account when analyzing decoding practices. Although it is understood that audiences are active in making diverse interpretations, different factors play a role in their interpretations of media texts that can include, particularly in the context of Afghanistan, ethnicity, class, gender, age, education, family context, religious beliefs, and urban/rural setting. Similarly, the findings of FGDs also illustrate that viewers' gender plays a significant role in their interpretations and receptions of soap opera text and representations of gender relations. Studying and discussing all the factors is out of this study's scope and can be interesting and possible future research. In this study, I merely discuss the role of gender that was revealed from the FGDs findings.

Female participants display diverse views on the portrayal of female characters. Some female participants show interest in seeing more assertive female characters, while other female participants want to see more *moderate* female characters. For instance, when asked what kinds of characters, without specifying the gender, they would like to watch, a female participant states:

I like a strong woman who is in a position of authority. For example, if a woman sees another woman, she could learn from her character, behavior and attitude towards her family or work. Such roles are motivating for me. When I watch women like that, I feel I should also be somebody in society and be useful for society.

Likewise, another female participant mentions,

I often like women's characters, especially those who live in poor conditions and face so many obstacles but still do not accept defeat and are firm and fight against all the odds and live for themselves and their families. Such characters fascinate me a lot.

Similarly, another female participant adds,

From my perspective, I want a woman who is very powerful and strong and dominates all men because in Afghanistan, still today, men have dominated and governed, and women are under domination. I want to develop a soap opera where a woman is more powerful than a man. That is how I want it to be.

Female participants also acknowledged that there are less moderate female characters. Female characters are represented either as *too rebellious* or *too weak*. For instance, one female participant adds, "there are mostly two kinds of characters in [foreign] soap operas; too passive or too wicked. A balanced character is almost unseen." The discussion with female participants also illustrates that they less likely find any female characters representing them or the way they desire to see women.

Furthermore, female participants display diverse views on female characters' portrayal in the media, particularly in soap operas. For instance, a female participant disagreeing with other female participants on representations of gender roles in soap operas mentions,

Female participant A: In contrary to the views presented [by other participants], If I was to develop a soap opera, for instance, if it is about family.... A man should be the head of the family who respects everyone, considers everyone's rights, and respect women and their rights in his family. He should be a man who always works hard towards supporting his daughters, sisters, wife, and mother to accomplish their dreams, help them and move forward together. And not only the man but women should also cooperate so that the family setting is preserved, and both sides achieve their goals.

Female participant B: but those watching a soap opera like that can interpret that women should always listen to men.

Female participant A: No, I am not saying that.

Female participant C: I am afraid I have to disagree with it. A man leaves in the morning and works until 4:00 PM, and so does a woman. However, the man comes home and complains that I am exhausted and lays down, and the poor woman never says a word and goes to the kitchen and starts her chores. This is too much, like why? If I were to make a soap opera, I would show that he should help with cleaning the house if she is cooking.

Interestingly, female participants debated, discussed, agreed, and disagreed on the representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas. Female participants displayed diverse viewers and readings gender relations representations in transnational soap operas. From this, it can be assumed that female viewers are more negotiating viewers compared to male viewers. However, contrary to female participants, all male participants agreed that women's representations in transnational soap operas are immoral, inappropriate, and unacceptable. No alternative readings were discussed; perhaps this can be assumed as maintaining their masculine honour. Azarbaijani-Moghaddam (2012) asserts that Afghan men often maintain sexist and unjust gender relations by becoming the concierge of gender order and justify using socially constructed masculinity and male identity. It is essential to mention that Afghan men are trapped in the constructed Afghan masculinity and the notion of *ghairat* or masculine honour. Afghan men are often under tremendous peer pressure to maintain their masculine identity and *ghairat*. Such peer pressure can have different forms for example verbal abuse, name-calling, and conflict. As this study indicated, contrary to female participants, all male participants often agreed on the *too liberal* representations of women in Turkish soap operas. This agreement can reveal that perhaps some male participants, despite having different opinions about women's representations, may not express their opinions due to the peer pressure and maintaining masculine honour and *ghairat*. In the context of Afghanistan,

perhaps like many other societies, gender roles are predominantly based on masculine honour culture, and it is maintained by, as argued by Vandello and Cohen (2003), female fidelity. Perhaps disagreeing with other male participants on the issue of morality and women's representation can put them in the great dishonour (*be-ghairaty*) and shame, making them unworthy of respect (Wyatt & Dunn, 2018).

Furthermore, female participants' views about female characters who have a voice, who demand, and make decisions are more favourable than male participants' views about such female characters. Male participants believe that female characters, as such, can *pollute* children's and women's understanding of life and mystify the family system. For instance, a male participant talking about the negative consequences of the soap operas mentions,

After watching [foreign] soap operas and their negative consequences, I know some families who decided to stop watching television or watch a few Islamic channels. They do not allow their families, especially young girls and boys, to watch [foreign soap operas]. They watch a few Islamic channels that are relevant to our culture.

Adding to it, another male participant mentions,

We have a neighbour who is an advocate. One night he broke three sets of televisions. He brought all the television sets out of the house and destroyed them. Now they do not have any television set at home.

I asked if it was due to soap operas and their content, he mentions, "yes, all because of these soap operas." Similarly, a female participant shares her story about not being allowed to watch television and particularly soap operas,

My husband and his family are traditional. He is not interested [in watching soap operas]. If I listen to music, he will tell me 'what is it you are watching!' or if I turn on soap opera, he will change the channel saying, 'leave it, what useless stuff you watch.' Encountering reactions as such discourages one, and stops watching anything on television.

Male participants often mention that soap operas' content regarding relationships between women and men is immoral and dreadful. One of the male participants adds,

Any soap opera you watch, all they talk about is love and romantic relationships. A [woman] will be with a man; she then disbands and starts a relationship with another man; and then gets married to someone else. However, later you find out she has a child with someone else. All these things, given our society, are immoral.

Significant differences arise in the reception and interpretations of the content of transnational soap operas and gender representations when the gender of the viewer is considered. Male participants often critique soap operas' content and the representations of gender relations in terms of religion and culture; the appropriateness and morality. They see transnational soap operas as un-Islamic and irrelevant to Afghan culture. However, although female participants are critical of the content and representations of gender relations in soap operas, they also display some optimism.

Furthermore, male participants mainly focus on female characters' representations and their influence on Afghan female viewers. There was almost no discussion on male characters' representations or their influence on shaping male viewers' perceptions. However, female participants were critical of representations of both female and male characters. They criticized female characters' representations as too passive and submissive and male characters as always dominant and violent. Contrary to the moral panic raised by the male participants, female participants' feedback illustrates a case of negotiated viewing in many ways.

Social Change Through Media: Possible?

Social change is another relevant theme that was revealed by the FGDs data. To understand the media's role in promoting social change, I asked participants how they see the media's role in encouraging social change and gender equality. A constant apprehension and, at times, optimism raised by participants was that media and television, in particular, could be a source of education

and information. Participants believe that the media constitute an integral part of people's life. Some participants indicated the importance of media for information through the news. For example, a male participant mentions, "media constitute the fifth pillar of a state. As some say, [media] are the public's sight and voice. If media aim to support a government or an issue they can, and if they aim to destroy it, they are able too." In contrast, others see soap operas as a window to other cultures and a medium to educate people on social issues.

Lack of awareness and adopting antisocial values. Study participants repeatedly mentioned that they believe that due to a lack of understanding or participants terming it *low awareness* among viewers, they often arrogate antisocial values from foreign soap operas or media content. For instance, a male participant states, "I think media's influence is stronger in Afghanistan and the main reason is the *low level of awareness* among people. Unfortunately, [Afghans] are influenced easily." Although both female and male participants agree on the significant role of media in society, they also believe that due to the *low level of awareness* among people, they often adopt the negative aspects of media text. For instance, a male participant states:

It is all due to the low level of awareness. Unnecessary imitations of the shows, instead of adopting the show's positive points, [viewers] focus on the negative issues and imitate them, which is one of the problems.

Likewise, a female participant also mentions that due to the *low level of awareness* among people, they often adopt negative aspects and overlook the reasons for showing the negatives. While some female participants agree that a low level of awareness is a reason for adopting the negative aspects of media texts by viewers. Some participants also believe that other factors such as family and education also play a role in viewers' interpretations and meaning making of media text. For instance, a female participant expresses, "I think it depends on families. If a family is broad-

minded, it can shape their perspective. For instance, there are women in these soap operas who go out to work and support their families financially.”

Additionally, according to the participants, since the educational programmes have low viewership, television networks, for business and profit purposes, broadcast programmes that can bring more viewers, even if it is merely entertainment and not education. For example, a male participant adds that viewers' awareness and interest in media content ultimately decide what stays on the air and what goes off. He states,

However, some of the private [television] networks have tried to develop and air educational programs, but unfortunately, such [content] receives low viewership. Viewers commonly watch humoristic shows, and that interests them. The educational aspects of programs are forgotten and less valued. A television network decides what to broadcast based on the viewership. Furthermore, male participants agree that the media industry's corporative nature often focuses more on profit and business aspects and less on encouraging social change. They also stress that viewership is substantial, and media outlets focus on increasing their viewership to bring profit. Thus, an educational programme lacking the entertainment component is less likely to attract viewers that will less likely bring sufficient profit.

Furthermore, when asked what role media can play in promoting social change and encouraging gender equality, particularly in Afghanistan, participants consider the media a significant social change source. Some responses, discussed in the previous themes, also show that participants tend to interpret soap operas' contentious elements of as an educational source to reject gender-based discriminations.

Culturally relevant and local content. Participants evince that social change is possible through media if the content is relevant to their culture, traditions, and present issues that exist in their society. For instance, a female participant says, “[Afghan media] do not talk or focus on

issues in our society. They only focus on entertainment programs that are often above the level of Afghan people's understanding." Adding to it, another female participant states,

...the focus is all on the news or Indian soap operas. Indian soap operas are very different from our culture. They should broadcast content that is relevant and similar to our culture so that viewers can learn something when they watch it and take pleasure while watching and feel good.

Likewise, male participants also stress on culturally relevant content in the media for social change. For example, a male participant states, "media outlets should be asked to create programs according to [Afghan people's] culture and religion and according to this society's needs."

Similarly, another male participant states, "media content related to Afghan culture can be very positive and significant."

Almost all the participants emphasize on benefits of locally produced content. A female participant stressing on locally developed content states,

[Television networks] should broadcast local content; create soap operas that are relevant to our culture... They should cover issues such as for children, the psychosocial issues for women, and informative and educational content.

Participants mention the locally produced and developed series called *Khat-e-Sovom* that aired in 2018. According to female participants, the series is significant because it portrayed current social issues in Afghanistan. In one of the female participant's words:

[Khat-e-Sovom] was very good [drama series].... Yes, it was locally produced. It showed that a girl could also establish a business. Remember, the girl who started her bakery business. It was an excellent series...

There are three or four families in the series, and every family has a different life, and they live in the same neighbourhood. While watching the series, we would tell one another; it is so much like our [family] (*laughs*). The series showed that a mother is violent in one family, and, in another family the father, is not a nice person.

For participants, locally produced content is of more interest as they can relate to it. Emphasize on local content that can represent local issues is prominent among participants. However, it is essential to state that female participants emphasize that locally produced media programmes should reflect on the relevance of content and the portrayal of socio-cultural issues in society. Cultural issues often include discussions on cultural, traditional, and religious norms that, at times, construct the discriminatory gender norms in society. In comparison, male participants focus less on socio-cultural issues and more on cultural, traditional, and religious relevance. Thus, male participants stress the content's cultural, religious, and traditional relevance despite being misogynistic and patriarchal.

Gender equality through media. Being said that, Afghan society is male-dominant, and the majority of female participants assume that equal partnerships among genders are unattainable. When asked if portraying different gender relations (i.e., non-traditional) can play a role in promoting gender equality, female participants believe it is unachievable. For instance, one female participant states, "there is something in men's DNA which will never accept [equality with women];" another female participant mentions, men cannot accept equality because "that is how [men] are created." Another female participant shares, "[men] cannot accept it. I think [implementation of gender equality] is not possible."

Additionally, a female participant states, "[men] cannot say that ok you come to do our job, and we will do yours because women are more patient and delicate." Interestingly, this notion that women are *patient*, *submissive*, and *delicate*, and men are *assertive* and *firm*, are observed among study participants and in the ways female and male characters are portrayed in soap operas.

Likewise, a female participant shares an experience stating,

Unfortunately, men will not understand it. If I share an experience, a few weeks or days ago there was I do not exactly remember if it was a soap opera or a film [on television] I was

watching. There was a young female who was getting married. She insists that she wants to be present in her Nikah [the vows ceremony]. My husband immediately changed the channel saying, 'curse on you, you all are provoking women.' I was like, look at their mindset; it is so narrow that they do not even want to see a woman [on television] to choose her future partner. I told him, 'let me watch what she is saying.' He replied, 'leave it.' Now imagine how narrow their mindsets are. They will not even accept such basic ideas.

Despite seeing a change in males' behaviour towards females as impossible, some female participants also indicate that they cannot accept discriminatory behaviour. For instance, a female participant states,

Nevertheless, another point that women like us who are educated and have been out in society with people cannot accept [the discrimination]. Those who live in rural parts are always busy doing house chores have no idea about the world outside...they accept that and the situation they are in, but we will not accept it.

Although female participants assume gender equality is difficult to achieve through media, solely; male participants overemphasize that media agencies should focus on cultural, traditional, and religious content, especially transnational media content. However, it is crucial to consider that traditional, cultural, and religious can often be misogynist, patriarchal, and discriminatory and thus can be a barrier to social change, especially gender equality.

Chapter Seven

Discussion

After presenting the findings of the study on representations of gender relations and participants' interpretations of portrayals of gender relations in transnational soap operas – Paiman and Qesay Maa – this chapter summarizes and conceptualizes the findings. Accordingly, the chapter is divided into three sections. Each section presents the findings in light of the theoretical framework of the study to discuss each research question. Due to the lack of literature on representations of gender relations and audience reception in the context of Afghanistan and Afghan media, I am discussing the findings of my study drawing on research conducted in other regions with similar to the Afghan cultural context.

Representations of Gender Relations in Transnational Soap Operas on Afghan Televisions: Reinforcing/Challenging Gender Stereotypes

Over the years, representations of women in the mass media have focused on feminist media studies (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Previously conducted studies have consistently indicated that gender is often portrayed in stereotypical manners in the media. According to Signorielli (2013), such portrayals have been shown to shape viewers' gender beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, Bhattacharya and Nag (2016) assert that the media play a crucial role in building public opinion and creating stereotypes. They further describe media as “purveyor of social messages” (Bhattacharya & Nag, 2016, p. 7).

One of the objectives of this study is to explore the representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas dubbed in the Dari language and broadcast on Afghan television stations. To explore the representations of gender relations, I analyzed the content of two Turkish soap operas on Tolo TV, Paiman and Qesay Maa.

One of the concerns for feminists has been the portrayal of women in the media, and they argue that media reproduce and maintain women's position as oppressed by presenting the dominant ideology (Kim, 2008). Likewise, television advertisements present romanticized images of *appropriate* behaviours and roles for men and women by assigning certain behaviours to women and men as part of their femininity and masculinity (Gunter, 1995; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981). Similarly, gender stereotypes are notably reflected in the episodes of the analyzed Paiman and Qesay Maa. The findings of the content analysis demonstrate that soap operas often perpetuate gender stereotypes. The content analysis illustrates that distinctions are prominent in portrayals of female and male characters in analyzed episodes of Paiman and Qesay Maa. The content analysis reveals that female characters are often represented as weak, submissive and domestic, and male characters are often aggressive, intelligent, and professional. Some of the findings are nearly similar to previous studies conducted in the West and the Global South.

Based on the findings attained, gender stereotyping was found for the following:

- Domestic vs professional;
- Emotional females vs rational males;
- Selfless females vs self-interest driven males;
- Professional males vs domestic females;
- Naïve females vs aware males;
- Dominant males vs submissive females;
- Male saviour vs female victim; and
- Objectification.

Gender stereotyping in soap operas. As mentioned earlier, representations of men and women in the analyzed Turkish soap operas reproduce and are aligned with gender stereotypes. Female characters are often portrayed at home, non-professionals, sensitive, emotional, and romantic partners to male characters. Men are often portrayed at work, saviours to female

characters, courageous, confident, and strong-minded. Such distinct depictions of female and male characters likely naturalize gender characteristics. Furthermore, depicting female characters performing domestic chores and being inside domestic settings and male characters outside the home in professional settings constructs the idea that women merely belong to domestic settings and professional spheres are where only men fit. Women's occupations and careers are almost always put after their domestic duties.

Similarly, some of the earliest media studies on gender relations representations looked at the different ways media depict women and men. For example, Goffman (1978) and McArthur and Resko (1975) reveal in their study that men and women are depicted differently and according to traditional gender-role stereotypes. They also found that men are portrayed as independent, in positions of authority, and professionals, while women are depicted as product users, dependent, and stay-at-home subjects. Likewise, Collin's (2011) review of 18 empirical articles on gender stereotypes in media worldwide found that women are often portrayed as sexualized or domesticated subjects. The analysis of Paiman and Qesay Maa in the current study also illustrates similar findings. It is worth noting that representations of gender relations have changed over time in the media but as Gadzekpo (2009) argues, "patriarchal framing of stories, ill-considered language and non-contextualized reporting undermines such stories" (p. 74). There are strong and powerful female characters portrayed in the analyzed transnational soap operas; however, stereotypical representations of female characters as emotional, inferior, and naïve are prominent. As Damean (2006) also finds in her study, when a female character is depicted as strong, successful, and professional, contrary to stereotypes, the focus moves to her personal life.

Similarly, the findings of the current study illustrate that strong female leads that are depicted as strong-minded and determined individuals still need to be *helped* and *saved* by their

male counterparts as they fail to cope with different situations and are not able to handle situations on their own and therefore almost always need men's support (Gunter, 1986). Such a depiction of women undermines their ability as people (Motsaathebe, 2009). By frequently depicting female characters as emotional, unhappy, sacrificing, and selfless, media constructs a fixed stereotypical femininity image. In doing so, the media promote stereotypes and further the lack of alternative representations, particularly for those who may not fit into the depicted femininity and masculinity images. I also want to emphasize here that expressing emotions should not be interpreted as a weakness. When I say women are depicted as emotional beings, I do not imply that it is a sign of weakness. However, depicting of an emotional woman against a rational man makes it a sign of weakness and imposes gendered stereotypes.

Additionally, when a behavioural trait such as being emotional is merely associated with womanhood, it further enforces the patriarchal gender system that stresses men not expressing emotions, which is equally dangerous for men and women. Thus, I am not arguing that female characters, like male characters, should be portrayed as emotionless subjects, but rather, expressing emotions should be seen as a human trait, not gendered. The findings also echo Tuchman's notion of symbolic annihilation by the media. Tuchman (1978) argues that women are usually absent in the media, and when they do appear, they are often reduced to childlike, in need of men's protection, or fitting to home.

Furthermore, female characters are often presented as selfless subjects, ready to sacrifice their wishes, desires, and comfort for *loved ones* or family considered the symbol of morality (Hampton, 1993). The portrayal of women responsible for keeping everyone happy and thinking about others first can reinforce the stereotype that women are *naturally* selfless beings, and those who act for their self-interest are selfish and wicked. Women are associated with taking care of

others, while men are not normatively expected to do so (Heilman & Chen, 2005). Thus, when a woman, for instance, decides to leave her partner, parents or child, is to be blamed (Badgett & Folbre, 1999). The *appropriate* behaviours for a woman are supporting others, worrying for others, and in general, thinking about others' well-being before self (Heilman & Chen, 2005). These normative female behaviours determine women what to do and how to be a woman, thus leading to women's expectations of being selfless (Heilman & Chen, 2005). Portraying women as selfless is also to assume that women do not have a separate identity from their family, partner, children, and, in the case of Afghanistan, their tribe. Likewise, Willet, Anderson, and Meyers (2016) argue that the *self* is principally associated with masculinity, and thus, the masculine self is seen as wise. However, the feminine self is seen as evil.

Soap operas are perceived as a female genre, and, at times, female characters are represented more than male characters in terms of numbers. However, despite a larger number of female characters, the central male protagonists hold equal and, at times, a more significant storyline position. Geraghty (1991) names soap operas with female leads "matriarchal soaps;" however, male characters still hold greater authority than females, and female characters are often traditional and adhere to patriarchal values. Also, female characters are more often seen in the private sphere, while male characters efficiently *manage* private and public spheres.

Furthermore, female characters are frequently depicted as loyal to family and particularly to their male partners. Their loyalty is not merely being truthful but forgiving and accepting their partners' flaws and wrongdoings. For example, in Paiman, Zainab forgets and forgives Husain's affairs and reunites with him. Female characters also demonstrate their loyalty by keeping their family and partners happy and far from sorrows, which means bearing all the burdens and distresses alone. The discussion of loyalty and bearing distress alone can be linked to women's

portrayal as selfless beings in transnational soap operas. The portrayal of women as loyal and selfless does not only stereotype women but also constructs social expectation of women. More than men, women might be expected to display “altruism,” i.e., selflessness (Rand, Brescoll, Everett, Capraro, & Barcelo, 2016).

Similarly, Heilman and Okimoto (2007) assert, “research has demonstrated that penalties indeed result when women engage in behaviors that are counter to female stereotypic prescription” (p. 81). Thus, it can be argued that women are not naturally selfless beings, or they do not *enjoy* sacrificing their happiness, but rather patriarchal gender system ignores the fact that women are burdened with expected gender norms. Also, the depiction of women’s suppression as a way of showing loyalty to men can reinforce the idea that her sole objective is to serve men – husband, father, brothers, and sons – and her family. Ideas, as such, were also seen prominent among male participants of the current study. Male participants strongly assert that women have to put up with their male partners until the end, irrespective of whether they are good or bad. Similarly, women’s family and relationships often define their identity and existence; thus, women are seen as relational rather than individuals.

Challenge or promote gender stereotypes? Paiman and Qesay Maa often portray women with hierarchal and patriarchal values. Besides, womanhood is associated with being married, having kids, and a romantic partner to a man. For instance, in both Paiman and Qesay Maa, the female protagonists are either married or a man’s love interest. The female characters who are not married or not in a romantic relationship are jealous or hysterical and struggle to find *a man*, and the reason for their jealousy and wickedness is *not* having a man in their life. As Seiter et al. (1989) remind us in *Remote Control*, “soap operas allow women to take pleasure in the character of the villainous, but they do not provide characters that radically challenge the ideology of

femininity” (p. 5). These soap operas fail to illustrate that people perform gender differently, and that *womanhood* and *manhood* are not practiced in a certain way. Thus, the ultimate goal of every woman’s life is not getting married or having children, and not every man practices masculinity through aggression and dominance.

Furthermore, most of the time, male characters are seen working, being professional, or owning a business. Thus, work and occupation, as depicted in these soap operas, are part of masculinity. However, it neglects women’s achievements and struggles in different professions and is far from the reality of many people’s lives. Be it in the context of Afghanistan or other countries worldwide; women are present in the workforce; they are professionals and business owners. For instance, Roya Mahboob, CEO and founder of Afghan Citadel Software Company, is a prominent entrepreneur in Afghanistan. Lack of portrayal of female characters in the workforce is reinforces of the patriarchal mindset that women belong to domestic settings, and men are breadwinners, providers, and intellectuals. Likewise, Haraldsson and Wångnerud’s (2019) study shows a significant connection between “media sexism” and women’s “political ambition” (p. 528). Haraldsson and Wångnerud (2019) assert that “where media sexism is high, and those women who are politically ambitious will be less likely to express this ambition by becoming a candidate that they would have been in an environment free from media sexism” (p. 533). Although Haraldsson and Wångnerud’s (2019) study explores the link between media representations of women in politics and audiences’ desire to enter politics, the findings are equally applicable to other media content such as soap operas and TV drama series. By representing women almost always in domestic settings and not as professionals may reduce opportunities and prospects (Eisend, 2010) for women to enter the workforce and pursue a career. It takes away alternative ways of life for women.

Furthermore, the analysis of the soap operas shows that images of men are equally stereotyped as images of women. The media reinforce the dominant idea that strength, problem-solving/rescuer, fearlessness, and toughness are masculinity traits (Wood, 1994). If stereotyping women is damaging, stereotyping men is equally damaging because they construct expectations and narrow our notion of what a man should do, can do, and be. For instance, Maher's character of in Paiman does not fit the hegemonic masculinity frame and is often the source of humour by other male characters. Stereotypes reduce people to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits. As Hall (1997) states, "stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference'" (p. 258). Thus, stereotyping establishes power relations within the social system and excludes those who do not conform to the social norms or social types (Dyer, 1977).

Additionally, male characters are often portrayed as displaying hegemonic masculinity. In dominant cultures, masculinity is associated with specific characteristics and behaviours such as toughness, controlling emotions, sexually confident, achievements, independence, and anti-femininity (Ward et al., 2006). Similar attitudes and behaviours are seen in the representations of male characters in the analyzed Turkish soap operas. Male characters mostly display characteristics opposite to female characters. For instance, if a female character displays emotions, a male character will demonstrate practicality; if a female character is portrayed weak, a male character will display strength. Such contrary male and female depictions remind me of Kimmel's (1994) statement that "being a man means 'not being like women'" (p. 126). It is essential to consider that views on masculinity shape men's views of themselves and their attitudes and interactions towards women and particularly women in their lives – mothers, partners, sisters, daughters, and colleagues (Ward et al., 2006). Thus, men's cultural conditioning as strong, aggressive, and controllers of emotions furthers the construction of hegemonic and *ideal*

masculinity in society and promotes the patriarchal gender system. Besides, Ward et al. (2006), in their study on the relationship between masculine ideology, media consumption, and men's attitudes about women's reproductive body, found that "multiple dimensions of men's media use were related to their offering strong support for traditional [masculine ideology]" (p. 712).

Objectification of women. The objectification of women occurs in different ways in the analyzed transnational soap operas. Women are often portrayed as a trophy to be won in the rivalry game between two men or as an object of exchange between men (Berberick, 2010). Furthermore, unlike Western media, where women's objectification is understood as displaying women's bodies for the male gaze, women's bodies are censored and blurred to avoid the male gaze in Afghanistan. However, it can be argued that censoring women's bodies further objectifies women and reduce them to body parts. Censoring women's body parts as the act of *protecting them* or making them unseen invokes the act of objectification that aims to constrain it (Butler, 1997). Objectification of a woman, be it by displaying her body or censoring it, can be seen as a form of maintaining and expressing patriarchy, making women "signifier to male other" (Mulvey, 1999, p. 58). Woman and her body are thus seen through men's eyes. Either woman's body is displayed or censored; it is women's objectification of by reducing them to external appearance and disregarding their characteristics as persons (Halliwell, Malson, & Tischner, 2011). As Cuklanz (2014) argues, "objectification of women in mass media not only is a pervasive problem but also in many instances can be considered a form of violence against women" (p. 32). It is essential to understand that "the struggle against sexism is a human rights issue. It is not an issue of morality or censorship" (MediaWatch, Canada, brochure, as cited in Gallagher, 2002).

Moreover, as a female viewer, I see fading and blurring a woman's body parts, for censorship purposes, it conceals her sexuality for me, and she appears as a de-sexual being. On the

one hand, women are seen as objects of desire for men, and therefore, their body parts are faded and blurred to avoid provocation of male sexual impulses, for which, presumably, women are responsible. While on the other hand, for female viewers, it can imply to see and portray themselves as desexualized objects, again, to prevent male sexual impulses. In either the cases, showing or hiding women's bodies, women are objectified by men, and for men, it is an attempt to reduce women to body parts and taking away their subjectivity and sexuality. As Jennifer Georgia (2018) writes in her article on the objectification of women in the West and East, "the problem is not women's sexuality, it is men's entitlement" (para. 2). As Mulvey states in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), women in films are represented from a heterosexual male perspective and desire. In the case of censorship, too, women's bodies are blurred or *unseen* for the heterosexual male audiences.

Women and men and their social relations. relationships between female characters in the analyzed soap operas are usually of warfare and conflict. Female characters often appear in face-to-face verbal conflict, shaming each other, being jealous, and sometimes display hatred for one another. Female characters are often portrayed as competing with one another (Özalpman, 2017). However, the reason for the hatred and jealousy is not always visible. Hatred and women bashing women is often visible in media. For instance, *The Bachelor*, an American dating and relationship reality TV series, is a good example, where women knock each other for men (Piper, 2015); and it is seen as entertainment and expected female behaviour. I have watched many Indian movies like *Zindagi milegi Na Dohara*, where male bonding is portrayed strong, and TV series *Bidai* where female friendships are short-lived and turn into rivalry and hatred.

Similarly, in her Ph.D. dissertation Wallace (1997) studied the notion of rivalry among women inscribed in novels by women between 1914-1939. Wallace (1997) argues that "rivalry

segregates a woman from other women to fit her into the status quo” (p. 5). Likewise, Wallace (1997) argues that the portrayal of rivalry between women in the media is both *encouraged* and *manufactured* “within the dominant discourse as a way of distracting women’s attention from the real competition – between men and women for political power and jobs” (p. 11). It is worth mentioning that I am not emphasizing that there should not be any competition among women, and I do not aim to further stereotype women as *nice* and *kind* individuals. I want to argue here is that we ought to deconstruct the representations of hate and jealous relationships between women in media. It is crucial to critically analyze whether such representations are driven by misogyny and other forms of oppression or is it merely a personality clash that can also be seen among men. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that such portrayals further the myth that female friendships do not exist, and there is almost always an “evil matriarch and a protective patriarch” (Piper, 2015, p. 678).

The findings of the analyzed transnational Turkish soap operas – *Paiman* and *Qesay Maa* – further indicate that there is constant jealousy and rivalry among female friends. Hence, such representations emphasize that rivalry and jealousy among women are inevitable. Furthermore, the portrayal of hate and jealousy among female characters in the soap operas solidifies the patriarchal system. As Piper (2016) states, “the overarching narrative that women are each other’s worst enemies” (p. 685) is still seen in popular culture and media today. When female rivalry is portrayed on screen, it vindicates it and overlooks the reality of male violence against women (Piper, 2015).

Absence and lack of representation. there is also a lack of representations of persons with disabilities and non-binary and gender non-conforming persons in the analyzed transnational soap operas. LGBTQ+ community’s representation is rare in Turkish soap operas (Larochelle, 2019).

Gender is fluid and not fixed; thus, representing certain behaviours and constructing gender binary forms prejudice and discriminatory attitudes towards those who express themselves differently than assumed male and female behaviours (Killermann, 2013). It is not merely the discussion of non-appearance of persons with disabilities and non-binary individuals in the media but also their absence in the situations wherein real life they would be present (Byerly & Ross, 2006). In one scene in *Paiman*, when indirectly homosexuality is discussed, it is portrayed as deviant and unpleasant to even think about it.

Similarly, in both soap operas analyzed, there is not a single representation of persons with disabilities. The lack of representation – absence – on screen is problematic for those who do not see themselves on the screens and for the entire society, since it is the marginalization of these groups and denial of their existence in society. For example, a traditional society like Afghanistan, homosexuality is seen as a foreign influence, a myth that perceives homosexuality as something that does not exist in Afghan society and belongs to *others* (foreigners or Westerns). Thus, the lack of representation of gender non-conforming persons furthers this myth that denies the existence of persons with different sexual orientations.

Furthermore, persons with disabilities and gender non-binary individuals are silenced by the lack of representations. Heterosexual individuals and able-bodied persons are more often surrounded by images they can identify, but for gender non-binary individuals and persons with disabilities any media visibility can have significant importance (Grassi, 2013). The decades of war in Afghanistan that continue until today have left many people with disabilities. A significant portion of the Afghan population is missing on screen. It is not merely the marginalization of people with disabilities but also the denial of their existence and emphasizes that only able-bodied people are worth representation on screen and beyond. However, it is also worth mentioning that

when we discuss representations and the presence of different groups of people on screen, it is essential to emphasize that their presence should not further oppress them through stereotypical representations by encouraging the status quo, as seen in *Paiman*. As Hall (1992) states, “what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated segregated visibility” (p. 24).

Additionally, the debates on representations of gender non-binary individuals and persons with disabilities have found little or no place in analyzing television content or any other areas in Afghanistan. It is important to note that homosexuality is a taboo topic in Afghan society and is considered un-Islamic and against the culture (Bezhan, 2017). The state can imprison individuals who identify as gay or lesbian or be killed by their family in *honour-killing* (Bezhan, 2017). Initiating this discussion is essential, but at the same time, not free of risks and challenges.

Conclusion. To sum up, the results of this current study on representations of gender relations in media support the large existing body of literature on the topic. Findings and discussions of the current study indicate that despite changes in society regarding gender roles and relations, these changes are rarely depicted in the media. However, it is not to deny that there have been some changes; there is still considerable stability in gender stereotyping in representations of gender roles and relations, and media “maintain the status quo of dominant ideology” (Benshoff, 2016, p. 150). Depiction of female and male characters as distinct and different over time can likely make them seen and understood as natural and inevitable (Steven & Ostberg, 2011) and promote the lack of diverse representations. The repetitive performances of males and females per dominant social norms actualize the categories and gender binary (Butler, 1990).

Additionally, women are objectified in different manners in the analyzed transnational soap operas. Women are reduced to sexual being or objects to be won and owned. As Berberick (2010) argues, “the objectification of women not only induces states of shame and fear in women; it also

promotes the treatment of them as inhuman playthings” (p. 7). Thus, women’s objectification is a way to continue and express patriarchy (Prieler & Centeno, 2013). The media present a distorted model of femininity and masculinity. Instead of placing women and men in equal positions in private and public spheres, media subscribe to traditional patriarchal norms by reinforcing gender differences and inequalities (van Zoonen 1994). Similarly, Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) argue that “gendered representations inform us both on behavior and looks” (p. 141).

Moreover, gender stereotyping might differ in the analyzed Turkish soap operas in the current study from Western TV series and soap operas. However, it is clear that both the Western and non-Western media, perhaps in different ways, represent women and men distinctly and often stereotypically. Also, such representations in the transnational media may or may not correspond to gender relations in the host society (Ikizler, 2007).

Role of Media in Shaping Viewers’ Perceptions of Gender Relations: Afghan Viewers and their Interpretations

The second objective of the study is to understand viewers’ perceptions and interpretations of gender relations’ portrayal in transnational soap operas. Livingstone (1998) asserts that understanding how viewers interpret and make sense of a program allows us to understand the *effects* or viewers’ selection of programmes and the relationship between content and beliefs. This section of the chapter discusses the study participants’ interpretations of representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas on Afghan television stations to answer the second research question. The second research question is: *What role do media play in shaping Afghan viewers’ perception of gender relations? Moreover, how do viewers interpret gender relations portrayed on television through transnational soap operas in Afghanistan?*

To meet the study's objectives, the notable findings of viewers' perceptions and interpretations are discussed with Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, focusing on the three viewing positions – dominance, negotiated, and oppositional.

Understanding viewers as passive consumers of media have long been challenged (Hall, 1980). As discussed in chapter four, decoding is an active and interpretive process (Hall, 1980). Diversity among individuals and groups reflects in their decoding process (Turner, 2003), and interpretations of representations vary by the place and time of production (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015) and context. As Hall (1980) describes, decoding takes place in three ways: by fully accepting the dominant text, negotiating with the text, or opposing the text. This study's findings indicate that participants displayed oppositional and negotiated viewing more than dominant/hegemonic viewing.

The themes revealed from the analysis of focus group discussions are:

- (1) As active viewers, audience make diverse meanings to media texts;
- (2) Viewers take different viewing positions for different texts; and
- (3) Viewers' gender plays a significant role in the process of reception and interpretations of media text.

Viewers as active meaning makers. The focus group discussions show that participants are active audiences and actively and continuously interact with media texts. It is also found that different audiences interpret the same text in different ways. Participants of this study often demonstrated oppositional and negotiated viewing. Oppositional viewing included two motives; rejection of a text for moral, cultural, and religious reasons; and rejection of a text for being unrealistic and irrelevant to their context. While negotiated viewing, often seen among female participants, included distancing, selective, and critical viewing.

As mentioned previously, the analyzed transnational soap operas often portray gender relations in stereotypical manners – females as emotional, submissive, naïve, motherly and males as strong, authoritative, problem solvers, and professionals. However, participants display different and interesting takes on these representations. Some see these representations as close to reality and oppose it for regulating such images, demonstrating negotiated viewing. While others see them as irrelevant to the Afghan people's context and culture, establishing oppositional viewing. Participants' responses indicate that as an active audience of soap operas, they are in constant negotiation and at times in opposition to soap opera texts. They filter out desired and undesired messages and texts, and/or ignore them. Moreover, some even decide not to watch soap operas or any other media genre as an act of resistance.

Similarly, female and male participants' responses differ in adopting transnational soap operas' negative and positive aspects. The majority of the participants assume that viewers adopt negative aspects from the transnational soap operas. By negative aspects, participants meant culturally and religiously irrelevant and *corrupt* content, which, according to them, pollute viewers' minds. Almost all the male participants strongly believe that the adoption of negative aspects is higher among viewers, particularly women and children. While agreeing on the adoption of negative aspects by viewers, female participants also illustrate that as viewers, they see the hidden messages behind negative images and texts.

Male participants seemed to speak of the power of transnational soap operas in terms of their ability to directly influence viewers' behaviour and values on gender performativity, particularly women and children. However, female participants' responses indicate the contrary. Male participants demonstrate confidence that the content of transnational media text and media text, in general, do not directly shape their behaviours and actions regarding their gender

performances. However, they assume that female viewers do not have the same ability. Participants' demonstrate that there is an assumption that *media do not directly shape their perceptions; however, they do shape OTHERS' perceptions!* According to male participants, female viewers, *like children*, cannot negotiate or oppose the media text and are thus passive receivers. Likewise, female participants believe that if male viewers see domestic violence performed in a soap opera or Television series; they are likely to believe that is *the norm* since society highly follows patriarchal norms. According to female participants, it is less likely that men would understand that the purpose of portraying a disturbing act of violence against women, for instance, is to argue that it is unjust and wrong. Patriarchal gender norms are deeply embedded in the Afghan culture, and as female participants indicate, it is not merely television and media that portray gender inequality, but inequalities and discriminations are visible in every aspect of the society. Thus, it is difficult for male viewers to determine that discriminations depicted in soap operas are not *normal* but instead display the unjust attitudes that exist against women in society.

Gender, culture, and interpretation. Gender relations in Afghanistan are defined and understood in the context of social relations, religion, culture, masculinity, and subordination (Rostami-Povey, 2007). It is also important to note that in Afghanistan, diaspora and exile have played roles in defining gender relations (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Decades of war resulted in massive immigration of Afghans seeking refuge in other countries (Rostami-Povey, 2007). During the war, Afghan immigrants and refugees to different countries, mainly to neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran, have likely adopted the host countries' social values, including gender values. Thus, their interpretations of gender relations representations can also reflect their understanding of gender relations and norms learned in diaspora during exile. However, there is a need to

holistically study the role of exile and immigration played, plays or can play in understanding gender norms and gender identity among Afghan youth.

Being said that, male participants' oppositional viewing is not to reject the stereotypical representations of gender relations; their rejections of soap operas are for, what they believe to be, *too liberal* representations of women that contradict Islamic values. It is essential to mention that religion and customs construct men's attitudes towards women in Afghanistan (Ayub et al., 2009). For instance, while religious leaders and some parliament members, mostly men, voiced their concerns about the corrupting effects of foreign soap operas on Afghan viewers who consume them, women and children are often the prime targets of such criticisms. While the religious leaders see transnational soap operas potentially misrepresenting Islam to the audiences, viewers, particularly female viewers, seem to be consciously distinguishing differences between Afghan and other societies.

Discussion with male participants of the study further indicates a constant fear of cultural imperialism through foreign soap operas and media content. Perhaps there is a belief that Afghan culture and Islamic values in Afghanistan are being threatened by foreign media text. However, most female participants indicate that they, as active audiences, actively negotiate with transnational media products; therefore, it is an overstated fear. Female viewers demonstrate the awareness that transnational soap operas represent a society that often does not correspond to their experiences (Hamburger, 2014). As argued by Fenton (2004), "women do not simply take in or reject media messages but use and interpret them according to their own social, cultural and individual circumstances" (p. 90). Similarly, feminist researchers argue against the sender/receiver conception of mass media and audiences and claim that female audiences play an active role in "constructing textual meanings and pleasures" from media texts (Fenton, 2004, p. 90).

Unlike the dominant views about Afghan women circulated in the Western academia and outside as passive victims in need of rescue from the powerful West (Rostami-Povey, 2007), female participants of this study demonstrate that they are active and aware audiences by offering diverse readings of the gender relations portrayed in transnational soap operas. Female participants often read the images in complex ways and express more open-minded values on gender roles than male participants. By open-minded values, I imply that they demonstrated an openness to seeing that gender is performed in different ways in different geographies. Although the ways gender relations are portrayed in transnational soap operas are not per Afghan culture, female participants seem to understand those differences and distance themselves in the process of negotiated viewing. As Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) argue, “transnational media can be used to negotiate identities or to renegotiate cultural values” (p. 154).

Additionally, viewers, particularly female viewers, often watch the soap operas for pleasure and entertainment purposes. However, their pleasure is sometimes understood as submitting to the text and content of soap operas. As Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1977, as cited in Skovman & Schröder, 1992) state,

To be pleased means to say Yes,...Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically, it is helpless, it is flight; not as is asserted, flight from wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance. (p. 2)

Discussions of pleasure and escapism (Ang, 1985; Livingstone, 1991) remain relevant here, as well. For some female viewers, soap operas are an alternative form of entertainment to the news. Also, watching soap operas is a way of distracting themselves from the everyday anxieties of events that take place in the country (Livingstone, 1988).

The debate on pleasure and popular culture is vital in audience research (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015). Fiske (1987) argues that pleasure is multi-discursive, and its meaning varies in

different discourses. Pleasure is part of audiences' interaction with media texts (Ang, 1985) and is informed by audiences' "social-historical situatedness" (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015, p. 147). Some may take pleasure in *looking at the spectacle*, Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and female spectatorship, while for others challenging heteronormative representations of gender is pleasurable (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015). In the case of the current study, pleasure is not merely *looking at* or challenging the status quo but also a source of overturning own reality (Kaplan, 1986, as cited in Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015); it is experiencing what one may not experience in ordinary life. For instance, some female participants said they choose not to watch the news because they are tired of hearing about conflict, war, and death, as it has become merely part of their daily life. They choose to watch soap operas and other entertainment programs to forget about daily struggles and problems in a conflict facing society like Afghanistan.

Additionally, some female participants also indicated that seeing strong women on screen is a source of motivation for them, and this motivation can also be translated as pleasure. As Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) assert, "identifying with a strong female character can offer the opportunity to create one's own meanings around issues addressed by the strong female" (p. 149). Thus, identifying with the subject positions constructed by soap operas can offer an opportunity to challenge the traditional patriarchal order (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015), which can be translated as pleasure of challenging the status quo. Consequently, pleasure of challenging the traditional gender system can be decoded as oppositional viewing by the audiences to resist the status quo.

Male participants' high rejection of transnational soap operas and particularly female characters representations as *too liberal* could also explain the fear of change that such representations may stimulate society. As Fenton (2004) asserts, "audience can also be understood by the way they resist the discursive power which tries to construct them in ways which suit those

powers” (p. 91). Male participants’ opposition viewing of soap operas is often about how female characters are portrayed, their way of living, making choices, dressing, and practicing decision-making. The disapproval does not include representations of male characters, their dominant behaviour, violent attitude, and practice of power over their female counterparts. Thus, male participants’ opposition viewing can perhaps be interpreted as maintaining their masculine and patriarchal power in society. Conversely, male participants demonstrate a more protective attitude towards traditional gender roles and their disapproval of transnational soap operas that, according to them, are “un-Islamic and culturally irrelevant” may display a fear of losing their hegemony and privileges. The constructed masculinity and male honour oblige men to maintain their *honour* that may also promote specific gender roles that can encourage and perpetuate violence against women (Vandello & Cohen, 2003) or reject any rights and liberations for women.

Since viewers’ experience and knowledge play a vital role in the process of decoding texts (Livingstone, 2007), male participants’ oppositional reading can also be interpreted as a lack of an alternative world view that can replace their patriarchal view; for instance, lack of feminist knowledge and alternative terminology. Also, viewers’ interpretations are linked to their worldviews, knowledge, social status, and culture (Bobo, 2004), and the perception of women being passive objects is deeply rooted in the patriarchal social orders in Afghanistan, which also reflects in male participants’ reading of women as passive beings.

Resistance, pleasure, fear, and interpretation. Participants’ interpretation of transnational soap operas indicated resistance, fear, and pleasure. Female participants interpreted representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas in unpredictable ways. On the one hand, these texts were merely used for entertainment purposes or resisted cultural irrelevancy by *othering* them (Parameswaran, 2003). On the other hand, female participants’ interpretations demonstrate that

soap opera text, particularly on violence against women, can be sites of resistance to traditional norms (Parameswaran, 2003). Female participants argue that transnational soap operas are sometimes a source of information, through which they can learn about various issues from a distance and hopefully avoid them in their own lives. However, such an interpretation was not seen among male participants. Some feedback suggests that by exercising selective viewing, viewers, particularly female, see some elements in transnational soap operas as a means of gathering knowledge and proceed to exercise judgment to differentiate between *right* or *wrong*. As Ang (1996) asserts, “audience actively and creatively make their own meaning and create their own culture” (p. 136).

Likewise, Georgiou’s (2012) study of transnational Arab television consumption among Arab women in the diaspora shows that Arab women watching transnational television in diaspora often “find themselves caught in the battles for modernity” (p. 871). However, this study demonstrates that Afghan women define modernity for themselves and not merely adopt *modernity* from transnational media content. They are very well aware of social and political tensions around the traditional and non-traditional representations of gender, particularly women, on television in the Afghan society.

Furthermore, female participants’ response reveals that they simultaneously enjoy and criticize transnational soap operas as active viewers. They neither passively absorb, as assumed by those disapproving the transnational media in Afghanistan, nor do they blindly reject the content. The negotiation process between the viewer and transnational media text includes selecting and adjusting the message to accommodate and associate (Liebes & Katz, 1990). Women distance themselves from the dominant discourses they see reflected in the transnational soap operas in

different ways. For instance, some distant themselves acknowledging regional cultural politics and others due to hegemonic perceptions of gender relations.

Moreover, the male participants' response illustrates that the transnational soap operas created a space for expressing contentious notions of gender relations, which they find unsettling based on their social and religious beliefs and values. Male participants attribute disruptions of the family system in Afghan society to the transnational soap operas. A similar finding was revealed in Salamandra's (2012) study of the Turkish soap opera *Noor* in Arab society. Salamandra (2012) states that according to Arab media, *Noor*, a Turkish soap opera, particularly its male lead actor is the reason for conflict and unrest among married couples in Arab society. Salamandra's study interestingly discusses how Arab men are more concerned about Arab women's attraction to the male lead actor of *Noor*. A similarity between Salamandra's study and my study is the notion that men are often more concerned about female viewers and their reactions towards what they believe as inappropriate media content and destruction and invasion of culture, traditions, ethics, and religion. Male participants' responses demonstrate how the patriarchal gender system is deeply rooted in Afghan society. As Ayub, Kouvo, and Sooka (2009) assert "literalist interpretations of religion are used to enforce the rules and regulate social interactions, and to give the authority of men over women moral credibility" (p. 12), which is also evident in the interpretative practices of male participants of this study.

The differences in interpretations of female and male participants indicate that as subjects, they have different histories, experiences, and perspectives that shape their viewers and thus their interpretations (Bobo, 2004) of gender relations in the media. Bobo (2004) argues that "*subject* is different from the individual" (p. 185, italics added). The subject is defined by Bobo (2004) as,

a social and theoretical construction that is used to designate individuals as they become significant in a political or theoretical sense. When considering a text – a cultural product – the

subject is defined as the political being who is affected by the ideological construction of the text. (p. 185)

Thus, different and resistant interpretations of the text are based on the subject's cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion. To sum up, viewers' interpretations of gender relations representations in transnational soap operas demonstrate two viewing positions: negotiated and oppositional viewing. Female participants' diverse and complex interpretations indicate of their consciousness as viewers engaging in selective viewing and resisting what they oppose. Similarly, male participants' opposition and resistance to transnational soap operas for their portrayal of women as being *too liberal* indicate that their social position defines, in some ways, the interpretative strategies they use when interacting with media texts; since "specific cultural competency will set some of the boundaries to meaning construction" (Bobo, 2004, p. 186). Male participants consider female viewers as passive consumers who are not able to interpret media text actively. Stereotypical representations of women as passive objects likely deform viewers' perceptions of women (Wood, 2015). Women are represented as passive and naïve beings and perceived as such by viewers, particularly male viewers. However, the current study indicates the contrary. The discussions with female participants indicate that they are aware and active audiences who are selective viewers and practice negotiated and oppositional viewing and resist dominant representations in the media. As active viewers, women are aware of intra-regional cultural differences and similarities. Therefore, women must not be seen as passive and vulnerable subjects consuming the soap operas unquestioningly. The relationship between Afghan women and these transnational soap operas is a negotiation process, where the question is about how they manage the content in the soap operas given the cultural expectations and challenging the patriarchal norms. Furthermore, gender

differences in decoding of gender relations representations in transnational soap operas are most noticeable when females and males' position in society is the subject of discussion.

Role of Media in Facilitating Social Change: Promoting Gender Equality through Media in Afghanistan

The tremendous growth and progress in the media sector in Afghanistan in the past decade is astonishing. Afghanistan, from being a country where all forms of media were banned, in just a decade and a half became a country where mass media and social media are progressing at an incredibly fast pace. The last 17 years have been the years of change for Afghanistan's media sector, particularly television. Television has become a window to other cultures, information and entertainment, and a source of exploring gender relations – women and men's roles in society. There is no denying that Afghan media have experienced more dramatic progress and changes during the last, almost two-decade; these changes are bound to affect the media's content. Brown and Singhal (1990) argue that exposure to even a single pro-social program can generate persistent cognitive and behavioural changes in viewers, demonstrating the significant role of soap operas designed to promote social and development issues and raise awareness.

As Signorielli and Bacue (1999) state, "television's role in society is one of common storyteller – it is the mainstream of our popular culture" (p. 528). Likewise, Grassi (2013) argues that in the media-saturated society of today, television can play a significant role in "expanding the range of feelings and desires seen in the public sphere" and "give visibility to non-dominant discourses" (p.22). Moreover, Waisbord (2005) asserts that the media do not have the magic and power to make people think and behave a certain way; however, they are only influential in providing the possibility to direct a message into social networks, stimulate communication, and make the message part of everyday interactions.

Similarly, television soap operas significantly influence viewers if designed with a particular agenda of awareness-raising or audience education. Audiences enjoy watching soap operas because such programs offer them gratification (Lu & Argyle, 1993). However, it is more complicated to debate on how to avoid and overcome stereotypical representations.

In this section, I intend to discuss the third research question for the study: *What role can media play in facilitating social change in Afghanistan? Moreover, how can media challenge traditional gender relations and promote gender equality through entertainment in Afghan society?*

As discussed in chapter seven, while discussing the role of media in promoting social change, particularly gender equality and advancing of women's rights, in the Afghan society, participants' responses indicate a plurality of views. Some responses indicated apprehension and hesitation, and some displayed optimism about the media's role in promoting social change. The participants' discussions indicate two key issues; first, the importance of entertainment factor in the programmes with educational intent, and second, adoption of antisocial values due to what they termed, *low level of awareness* among viewers in Afghanistan. With that being said, I am recommending integrating an intersectional framework into EE strategy to promote gender equality, engage men in the process to imply that gender inequality is not merely women's issues, and avoid the notion of individual choice and neoliberal viewpoint.

Entertainment for education and audiences' lack of awareness. Despite the diverse views about whether the media can promote social change, all the participants indicate that media are an integral part of people's lives and play an essential role in society. However, participants also presume that achieving gender equality merely through media is unfeasible since tensions associated with gender inequality and women's rights are not only located on the screen but also in

Afghan society within their communities around them. Often traditional practices, codes, and beliefs are causes of discrimination, vulnerability, and violence against Afghan women and girls (Pilongo et al., 2016). Similarly, male participants also emphasized that other institutions such as family and schools should stimulate discussions on gender equality and women's rights to promote a social change alongside media.

Furthermore, as indicated by participants, educational programmes on Afghan televisions and media outlets often lack an entertainment factor, which results in low viewership. Considering the media industry's capitalist and corporate structure, television networks and other media outlets' main aim is profit-making. Therefore, to attract high viewership and profits, they often focus on entertainment programmes that may or may not necessarily have any educational factor.

Entertainment-Education (EE) strategy discusses low viewership for educational media content, resulting due to a lack of entertainment elements in the design of educational media content. As Brown and Singhal (1990) argue, entertainment media have a high potential to enlighten audiences on various social issues such as health, environment, family planning, gender equality, and mental health. To address topics as such, it is essential to use practical media strategies and a commercial capability that can attract and retain audiences (Brown & Singhal, 1990). Hence, entertainingly designing a pro-social soap opera helps raise awareness among audiences on specific issues and be economically profitable (Brown & Singhal, 1990). EE strategy utilized in the design and planning of media content can stimulate discussions among audiences on critical social issues (Chatterjee, Bhanot, Frank, Murphy, & Power, 2009); and thus, can highlight invisible issues into public focus and encourage reconsideration (Lapskancy & Chatterjee, 2013).

Furthermore, participants of this study also displayed concerns for adopting the negative values displayed in soap operas and media due to audiences' *low level of awareness* about their

surroundings and the world in general. Notably, female participants' discussions indicate that they believe that men, especially in Afghan society, often do not comprehend that portrayal of harmful masculine behaviours and media attributes is to display their negative consequences on people and society. Relatedly, Lapsansky and Chatterjee (2013) assert that despite EE strategy being an effective and successful approach for challenging gender norms, it also often contributes to, albeit unintentionally, promoting harmful social and gender norms. Singhal and Rogers (1999) also indicate a similar issue in their study of *Naseberry Street*, radio soap opera, for family planning in Jamaica. They illustrate that a male character named Scattershot, who was supposed to be portrayed as a negative role model, someone with numerous sexual partners, was perceived otherwise (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). A national survey in 1988 demonstrated that women more than men disliked Scattershot; while he was seen as a positive role model among some men in Jamaican society (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Verma and Mahendra (2004) also assert that in societies where "culturally acceptable norms" of interaction between males and females are technically absent, youth often derive their understanding of gender relations and relationships from the media (p. 76). Therefore, media representations can be more pronounced among men, particularly young men (Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013). Additionally, oversimplification of messages in the media can do more harm. Presenting an issue dichotomously – positive and negative, good and bad – does not provide a full picture and does not discuss the role other factors such as race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and (dis)ability may play.

Similarly, Dutta and Basnyat (2008) studied an EE intervention in Nepal that aimed to promote joint decision-making among couples on family planning. They argue that not considering the patriarchal hierarchies and gender norms in the community can further reinforce gender power hierarchies and support the status quo (Dutta & Basnyat (2008)). Therefore, it is essential to pay

significant attention to how male and female characters are constructed in the EE programmes and how they may influence gender norms (Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013) in the long term. On the basis thereof, I argue that an intersectional approach is essential in designing an EE media intervention.

Entertainment-education, Intersectionality, and social change. Grounding EE strategies in understanding intersections of different factors – gender, sex, class, age, ethnicity, race, ability – allows to represent different scenarios and avoid exclusions and further marginalization of different groups of people. Intersectionality can challenge the notion of women and men being homogenous groups and allow them to theorize and discuss heterogeneity within identity categorizes. Thus, representing a broader spectrum of gender. Additionally, it is vital to identify what knowledge, value, *problem*, and social issues are represented and how different groups are affected by these representations.

Meanwhile, the concept of intersectionality has travelled across the borders, it has moved beyond the “Anglo-American” focus and has formed new approaches adequate to the context and setting (Rigoni, 2012, p. 837). Thus, in the context of Afghanistan, gender must be seen through the intersections of ethnicity/race, sex, class, culture, and religion as well as (dis)ability to identify and represent multiple forms of inequalities that exist in the society (Barnum & Zajicek, 2008). Intersectionality allows an analysis of complex interactions that shape power relations in gender; it can provide an alternative perspective on minority groups’ representations in the media (Rigoni, 2012). The portrayal of alternative forms of gender relations can allow audiences to question the dominant gender norms and deconstruct them and identify already existing alternative gender norms in society (Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013). It is crucial “to attempt to change the perceived variability of groups such that the perceiver sees that the stereotypes, although perhaps true, are far

from true for *every* group member and thus not that diagnostic” (Stangro, 2016, p. 14, emphasize added) to reduce stereotypical representations of gender relations. Integrating the intersectional lens in EE interventions can allow more complex understandings of gender identity and experiences.

Furthermore, intersectionality stimulates the discussion on privilege and oppression between women and men and among different groups of women and men, integrating the discussions of race/ethnicity, class, and (dis)ability. Thus, the experiences represented in an EE program can display how one aspect of one’s identity can be a privilege for one individual and a source of oppression for the other. Additionally, intersectionality dismisses the notion of essentialism (Garry, 2008). By dismissing the notion of essentialism, it is emphasized that not all group members have the same experiences and are affected by patriarchal values in the same way. Hence, the overall objective of an EE designed with an intersectional lens will be to combat racism/ethnic discrimination, classism, gender discrimination, heterosexism, and sexism.

At times, the social fabric of communities can also cause barriers to successful EE outcomes (Brown & Singhal, 1999). Inability to foresee a media program’s social and cultural influences can end in surprising results (Singhal, Rogers, & Brown, 1993) such as protest and resistance. For EE soap operas or any media genre or format to be significant in promoting women’s rights and gender equality, Singhal and Rogers (1999) imply that messages and content should be designed *carefully*. EE strategies ought to be substantiated in terms of gender relations representations in understanding that gender is a social construct and fluid. Hence, it should present to audiences the prospects to analytically challenge “idealised” notions of gender norms (Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013, p. 41).

Men promoting gender equality. Pilongo et al. (2016) argue that in the context of Afghanistan, “there is an unacceptable silence surrounding the widely known discrimination and violence against girls and women” (p. 1). Their research on masculinities in Afghanistan also demonstrates that there is a level of “acceptance of masculinity-based culture of violence” among Afghan women (Pilongo et al., 2016, p. 1). Thus, any discrimination, vulnerability, and violence on the screen can be interpreted as *normal*. Therefore, while such texts can stimulate discussions on critical social issues, they can also further reinforce stereotypical gender relations. To address issues as such, in India, campaigns like, *What Kind of Men Are You?* and *Bell Bajao*, utilizing EE strategies, aimed to engage men in ending violence against women. India being a patriarchal society, hegemonic masculine norms are highly accepted; therefore, *What Kind of Man Are You?* started by acknowledging the prevailing hegemonic masculine norms and then challenging “the audiences to question the logic of these norms” (Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013, p. 41).

Additionally, Lapsansky and Chatterjee (2013), in their content analysis of the *Breakthrough* EE campaign in India, highlight some crucial points as lessons learned. Although Lapsansky and Chatterjee (2013) discuss the points regarding the portrayal of masculinity, the lessons learned can also be useful in discussions of the portrayal of gender relations, in general, in media. The World Health Organization (2007, as cited in Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013) states that it is evident from previous studies that when men challenge gender norms, it is likely to see positive changes. Lapsansky and Chatterjee (2013) further suggest that “there is a need to more strongly engage men. Through challenging hegemonic masculinity and inviting men to redefine these norms, EE can contribute to long-term and sustained gender justice” (p. 52). Similarly, Pilongo et al. (2016) also emphasize including Afghan men and boys in gender equality discussions in Afghanistan. According to them, “the responsibility is on men to create a paradigm shift, and to challenge each

other to break social acceptance of 'toxic masculinity.' Without this debate, silence is a form of consent; men are part of the problem, and they are also solution" (p. 1). Agreeing to it, I want to add that gender equality and, in general, gender issues are not merely *women's issues*. Unlike the assumption, mainly existing in Afghan society, gender equality benefits both females and males and all genders. In the context of Afghanistan, the term *gender* is almost always associated with women. According to Azarbaijani-Moghaddam (2012), the exclusion of men from the discourse can lead to negative perceptions, and gender equality becomes a threat to masculinity and men privilege. Therefore, inviting men in the conversation to challenge dominant gender ideologies and redefine gender norms likely shifts the focus of the discussion from a *women's issue* to a larger social issue. Thus, an environment is to be created where dialogues can be initiated between genders.

Moreover, in gender equality and empowerment discussions, more focus is placed on women, which is appropriate considering the male-dominant society and norms. However, in the discussion, we tend to overlook the tremendous pressure on men to maintain the socially constructed masculinity and *ghairat*. Albeit, here the focus is Afghan society and Afghan men. The discourse of gender equality ought to include men and women's liberation from constrained gender norms and expectations that are narrowly defined (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2012). Afghan society places high expectations for men, and when they cannot live by those expectations, they are humiliated and shamed, and their honor and *ghairat* are questioned (Echavez, Mosawi, & Pilongo, 2016). Thus, men must understand that gender inequality is oppressive for them as it is for women. If gender inequality privileges men, it also has long-term negative impacts on them (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2012). Therefore, gender equality does not benefit only women but all.

Entertainment media programmes with a social issue can present how socially constructed gender norms affect men and women.

Avoiding neoliberal viewpoint. it is equally vital to avoid neoliberal values when discussing topics such as gender equality, women's rights, and gender empowerment in the media. According to Collins and Bilge (2016), "the neoliberal world order relies on a global system of capitalism that is inflected through unequal relations of race, gender, sexuality, age, disability and citizenship" (p. 138). Dutta and Basnyat (2008) assert that the EE programme on family planning in Nepal promoted a neoliberal view, perhaps unintentionally, by making individuals responsible for *bettering* their lives. While seeking to educate audiences that improving their living conditions lays in their own hands, the EE programme implied that all couples have *equal* opportunities if they learn how to plan their families (Dutta & Basnyat, 2008). Such an approach ignores the fact that structural factors affect communities and individuals differently. As Sharma and Pathak-Shelat (2017) assert, "patriarchy oppression is complex," and thus affects everyone differently (p. 245). Thus, the issue might not merely be a *responsible choice* to better one's life but also other aspects, such as access to resources (Dutta & Basnyat, 2008). Therefore, the discussion should not focus merely on gender and sex but also on other interlocking factors that construct the disparity to avoid further echoing the patriarchal norms. Thus, applying an intersectional perspective can widen the discussion and avoid individualism and personal responsibility.

Often media structures feminist discourse in a way that can promote notions of "individual choice, empowerment, and personal freedom" (Gallagher, 2014, p. 27) as self-regulation. The portrayal of equal gender relations is essential, and thus, it is crucial to be conscious of the long-term consequences of gendered characters' portrayal (Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013). Furthermore, I also believe that employing an intersectional lens to EE programmes and, in

general, in the media content, can challenge hegemonic and homogenous representations of gender relations (Barnum & Zajicek, 2008).

In addition to considering the intersectional approach, engaging men, and preventing neoliberal values in a pro-social media programme such as soap opera, it is equally important to raise gender awareness among policymakers, media practitioners, and audiences (Gallagher, 2002). To promote gender equality, it is essential to spread awareness among audiences that gender roles are not fixed as perceived but change over time and across geography (Butler, 2010). By presenting and understanding gender relations as unfixed and fluid, EE programmes can challenge audiences to deconstruct dominant notions of gender.

In a society where patriarchal norms strictly define gender norms, gender stereotypes can be entrenched in the culture that can also structure the perspectives of creative people who aim to design media content to promote of gender equality (Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013). Additionally, since we are raised in gender-biased and patriarchal environments and might have internalized dominant gender norms, it is essential to “provide gender sensitisation for programme and creative staff” (Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013, p. 51).

In the context of Afghanistan, as discussed in previous sections, the debate often surrounds the portrayal of women in the media in terms of morality. However, a *fair* portrayal of gender relations is overlooked, or I would argue there is a lack of understanding of the notion of *fair portrayal*. Beijing Platform of Action on Women and Media argues that “the lack of gender sensitivity in the media is evidenced by the failure to eliminate the gender-based stereotyping that can be found in public and private local, national and international media organizations” (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995, p. 99). Beijing Platform’s strategic objective J.2 calls for promotion of “balanced and non-stereotypical” representations of women in media (p. 101).

For media to play an essential role in eliminating the biases in representations, the biases should also be removed at policy levels. To accomplish this objective, it suggests, for example, gender-sensitive training for media practitioners, avoiding portrayal of women as sexual objects and inferior beings, raising awareness about sexist stereotypes, codes of conduct and guidelines on promoting non-stereotypical representations, and developing a gender perspective on different issues. In Afghanistan's context, television networks, as self-regulatory approaches, have adopted self-censorship mechanisms to avoid controversies and backlash from religious powerholders and government officials concerning women's *inappropriate* portrayal in terms of morality. However, their self-regulations do not focus on balanced representations of gender. There is a requirement of a written policy on gender portrayal that outlines the avoidance of stereotypes, demeaning, discrimination, and promotes gender-balanced representations in the media.

Notwithstanding, the guidelines and codes of conduct should not be defined and conveyed in *moralistic* terms, as argues Gallagher (2002). Being said, gender specialists' involvement in policy development and writing guidelines and codes is crucial (Gallagher, 2002). Furthermore, media monitoring and activist groups can play a significant role in raising awareness, increase media literacy, and monitor media agencies on gender portrayal and equality.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion and Future Research

Utilizing content analysis, in the present study, I explored the representations of gender relations in transnational Turkish soap operas – Paiman and Qesay Maa – on an Afghan television station, Tolo TV. Through focus group discussions, I also explored viewers' perceptions and interpretations of gender relations in transnational soap operas and how media can play a role in promoting social change. Since the study focuses on gender, media representations, audience reception, and social change, I applied feminist methodology. Feminist research and methodology focus on broader social change and social justice (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2012) and apply different methods, informed by feminist values that differ with context, subject, and researcher (O'Neill, 2002). Additionally, my attempt through this research was to provide a balanced study of content and reception analysis. Furthermore, by applying feminist media theory, encoding and decoding model, and entertainment-education strategy as the theoretical framework, I provided a thorough discussion on the findings of representations of gender relations, viewers' perceptions, and social change through media.

Transnational soap operas have raised several debates in Afghan society. They are admired by some and criticized by others. Transnational soap operas have also attracted strong reactions from religious groups in Afghanistan. The transnational soap operas are stuck in a tug of war between television networks, audiences, and religious groups, and sometimes government officials on their portrayal of women. Despite controversies and oppositions from religious groups and government officials, transnational soap operas seem to remain on Afghan televisions. Also, dubbing transnational soap operas in local languages – Dari and Pashto – reduces the language gap, *localizes* them, and makes them approachable to the Afghan audiences.

After introducing the study, statement of the problem and research questions in chapter one to build a contextual background, in chapter two, I presented the history of Afghanistan, social and cultural attitudes towards women, movements and reforms for women's rights, history of progress and downfall of media in Afghanistan and transnational media flows in Afghanistan and soap operas. Chapter two presented a literature review for the study discussing feminist theory, feminist media studies, feminist television criticism, feminist reception theory, and postcolonial media studies. Chapter three laid down the theoretical ground discussion on media representation, stereotyping and censorship, encoding and decoding model, and entertainment-education strategy. I analyzed the methodological procedures, issues, challenges, and limitations in chapter four. Chapter five presented the findings of content analysis of studied soap operas on representations of gender relations. In chapter six, I provided the findings of viewers' perceptions and interpretations of soap operas by analyzing focus group discussions. In chapter seven, I discussed the research questions through the study's findings – content analysis and focus group discussions – and uncover how gender relations are represented in *Piaman* and *Qesay Maa*; how viewers interpret those representations; and the role media play in promoting social change.

Several studies (e.g., Byerly & Ross, 2006; Gallagher, 2005; Tuchman, 1978) have discussed stereotypical representations of women in the media. The content analysis of *Paiman* and *Qesay Maa* also indicates that female and male characters are represented differently and often stereotypically. Most of the current study findings are consistent with common stereotypes of gender relations found in previous studies on the Western media (see Ang, 1985; Byerly & Ross, 2006; Gallagher, 2005; Tuchman, 1978; van Zoonen, 1994). In terms of representations of gender relations, old problems still exist. The study established that most of the time, female characters' representations are in traditional manners and private domains. Furthermore, female characters are

often portrayed as weak and dependent on male counterparts. Participants of the study, particularly females, also indicated that they see less diverse roles for women in the transnational soap operas.

A Significant trend that cuts across both the transnational soap operas is that traditional patriarchal values more often define gender roles. Representations of stereotypical gender roles can result in the perception that there are no female roles other than traditional stereotypical ones (Marx, 2008). When female characters are established as strong, independent, and strong-minded; they still abide by traditional gender roles (Üstek & Alyanak, 2017). Moreover, rebellious female characters are often portrayed as immoral, who cannot find *love* in their lives to be happy. Women are rarely seen as independent social beings but often as part of their family (Ikizler, 2007) and tribe. Women are often portrayed as homemakers and less likely professionals, which fails to explain working women's reality on the ground. The media fail to reflect the enormous social changes in society, such as women's presence in the workforce and changing relationships between women and men (Eisend, 2010; Tuchman, 1979). Likewise, male characters are also stereotyped. Male characters are often seen controlling their emotions, which means not demonstrating emotions such as crying, enthusiasm, and excitement. Expressing emotions in different ways is merely associated with female characters, which connotes that emotions do not have a place in masculinity and further implies that *boys do not cry*. Stereotyping men is equally problematic and excluding those who may not comply with stereotypical masculinity.

Additionally, objectification of women as sexual beings occurs in different ways, mainly through censoring their body parts in an intent to *protect women* from exploitation. Women are reduced to body parts and are defined through their external appearance, which degrades and overlooks their characteristics and achievements.

Furthermore, representations of gender, alongside being traditional, are also very heterosexual and ableist in the analyzed transnational soap operas. There is an absolute lack of representations of persons with disabilities and gender-nonconforming individuals. As I have argued, it is not merely the marginalization of persons with disabilities and gender-nonconforming individuals but neglecting their presence in society.

Moreover, the current study also indicates that the meanings that I, as the researcher of the study, retrieved from the content of soap operas, are different from the meanings study participants considered. As Livingstone (1998) asserts that “the meanings which analysts find in the text may not be those which a reader finds” (p. 35). Therefore, it is crucial to study the audience to understand how they make meanings (Livingstone, 2003) rather than assuming how audiences might have understood the text or generalize my interpretations (Hole & Jelača, 2018).

Audiences are neither passive receivers of media texts nor their meaning-making process is one-dimensional (Anaz, 2014). In particular, the focus group participants generated a wide variety of interpretations regarding the representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas. As active viewers they are informed media users with a critical lens towards media. Participants demonstrated two viewing positions – negotiated and oppositional viewing. They also demonstrated distant and selective reading positions based on social and cultural distinctions towards transnational soap operas through their strong negotiated viewing. As active audiences, participants analyze media texts critically, rather than consuming the text passively. Female participants notably demonstrated that although as audiences they enjoy and take pleasure from watching Turkish soap operas, they also distant themselves or resist the *undesired* messages that, according to them, are irrelevant to their culture and context or against their moral values. Female participants criticize transnational soap operas for portraying immoral behavior, but they also see

transnational soap operas as a window to understanding different cultures, religious practices, and gender performances. Male participants were extremely critical of transnational soap operas for contradicting Islamic and Afghan cultural values. They also see transnational soap operas responsible for the destruction of family relations and destroying traditional relations between women and men in Afghan society.

Viewing attitudes and experiences differed among women and men. Female participants often demonstrated negotiated viewing while male participants were more often oppositional viewers. Male participants mainly display concerns for female viewers and youth and consider them passive consumers. However, female participants' critical attitude towards the representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas and their awareness of cultural, political, and regional differences challenge this perception of male participants. The perceptions of male participants about women as passive receivers, as I argued, signifies women and children intellectually as vulnerable and naïve (Üstek & Alyanak, 2017). Such an understanding also indicates the patriarchal gender ideology, embedded in the Afghan society, that envisions men as morally and psychologically more capable than women (Üstek & Alyanak, 2017). Contrary to this perception, female participants consistently employed a variety of selective and distancing strategies when watching transnational soap operas.

The oppositional viewing that male participants often demonstrated indicated resistance and rejection of transnational soap operas for their representations of women as *too liberal*. Male participants' oppositional viewing, as I argued, also indicates a fear of Afghan women becoming *too liberal* and men losing their dominance and power over women and other marginalized groups.

Additionally, audiences' gender also plays a part in shaping their perceptions. Furthermore, participants themselves, both females and males, felt immune to any influence from transnational

soap operas and other media content. However, they believed that others might not be immune to media content and are highly influenced by them.

Interestingly, female participants highlighted that through negotiated viewing; they also resist the status quo. For female audiences, watching of stereotypical gender relations is not merely accepting them, but challenging and questioning the dominant ideology around gender relations. Moreover, transnational soap operas are sites of pleasure and happiness for some audiences, particularly females. Away from daily conflict and war in the country, transnational soap operas provide a space of escapism in the form of entertainment to audiences.

Although this study has some limitations, discussed in detail in the methodology chapter, it concludes that Afghan viewers, as active viewers, are critical of media. Their reception of transnational soap operas is not merely acceptance or rejection but a complex process of meaning-making.

Discussions on media's role in promoting social change, particularly, gender equality raised some interesting points. On the one hand, female participants assert that gender equality is unattainable solely through media since patriarchal gender norms are deeply embedded in the Afghan culture. On the other hand, participants demonstrated concern about the *low level of awareness* among people, resulting in the adoption of antisocial values and behaviours from media. The discussions also revealed that entertainment is a critical component of an educational programme to attract viewership. Thus, Entertainment-Education strategy can be a practical approach to design media content with educational intent through entertainment, since EE as a communication strategy allows creating media content that is both commercial and informative. EE is a mechanism of delivering media messages to both educate and entertain viewers (Papa & Singhal, 2009). However, the debate on social change through media is more complicated. One

cannot conclude that yes, media can promote social change or assert no, they cannot. Although I support the existing research on the effectiveness of the EE approach in social change, I suggest an intersectional lens is essential in avoiding fallbacks, as much as possible, and further reinforcing normative gender and neoliberal values.

As mentioned earlier, participants in the current study demonstrate a concern that viewers likely adopt *antisocial* values portrayed in transnational soap operas and the media in general. Therefore, to promote social change through media and prevent the adoption of negative values from the media content, it is crucial to consider the gender norms and values in society when developing and constructing the characters in a soap opera or other EE programmes. Likewise, by endorsing self-regulation through EE programmes, there is also a risk of promoting a neoliberal view that promotes the idea of individual responsibility and choice (Meyers, 2019). To avoid such issues, I assert that it is essential to take an intersectional approach in designing EE programmes and promoting social change through media. EE intervention with an intersectional perspective can reflect on different factors to challenge traditional gender norms and challenge socially constructed gender and social norms. EE soap operas with an intersectional approach are likely to promote women's rights and gender equality by presenting different intersecting factors of oppression – gender, sex, class, abilities, age, religion, tribe/ethnicity.

Despite some apprehensive presumptions among participants of the study participants about the media's role in promoting social change, they also emphasize that media is an integral part of society. Participants strongly support local content that discusses local issues, problems, challenges, and lifestyle to promote social change through media. Male participants emphasize local content for its relevance to cultural and religious values. In contrast, female participants support local content that can discuss and focus on issues that exist in Afghan society and are not

alien to viewers. The study concludes that to challenge traditional gender norm, stimulate social change, and gender equality, it is essential to represent alternative portrayals of gender relations and contest dominant ideologies of gender.

Like any other study, this study also includes some limitations. One of the limitations of the study as discussed in the methodology chapter, is the generalization of the findings. Since the study presents a particular groups in a particular location, the findings may not reflect the behaviours of different groups in different locations. Moreover, due to time constraints, lack of resources, and security issues in the field, the size of FGD participants and soap opera samples remains small and thus cannot be represent of a larger population and sample.

Furthermore, this study has significant implications for future feminist media research and practices. Understanding problematic representations of gender relations in media can help stimulating the discussion of sexism in the media and demand for media reform over representations of women and gender relations and increase representations of other marginalized groups – persons with disabilities and transgender people – in the context of Afghanistan. Moreover, discussions on alternative gender representations can encourage discussions on the constructive nature of gender and challenge the notion of fixation.

Future Studies

Future studies should continue to explore representations of gender relations in the media and particularly in entertainment media. When I conducted this study, some local dramas and television series were being produced and aired on Afghan television stations. Since locally produced television series are increasing in Afghanistan, it will be interesting and important to study gender relations representations, shaping perceptions, and audience's reception of gender relations on locally produced media content (Liebes & Katz, 1990). Furthermore, it is also

interesting to understand what role they are playing or can play to promote social change in the Afghan society. A possible suggestion for future research can be to focus on one soap opera or local drama series to provide detailed analysis regarding representations of gender relations. Due to the lack of resources and unstable security conditions, my study relied on one geography and participants mainly from urban settings. Future research in this area should include rural perspectives since there are substantial differences between rural and urban populations regarding lifestyle and understanding and gender performance.

An issue that was not addressed in detail in this study is representations of persons with disabilities and gender non-binary individuals. It is worth mentioning that currently, there are some studies on representations of persons with disabilities and gender non-binary and gender-fluid individuals in the media. However, in the context of Afghanistan, considering the sensitivities around sexuality and sexual orientations in society, they are still unexplored research areas. Therefore, it is crucial to find ways to tackle such sensitive and stigmatized issues in society through the media and stimulate discourses on representations of persons with disabilities and gender non-binary individuals. Future studies focusing on representations and the importance of representations of persons with disabilities in the Afghan media will also be an opening to the disability studies in Afghanistan. Similarly, a study on representations of gender non-binary and gender-fluid individuals in the media is essential, although not free from risks and backlash, particularly in the conservative society of Afghanistan.

Moreover, as Feasey (2008) states,

there is little to account for the array of masculinities seen on the small and no single defining text that is dedicated to the way in which the presentation of masculinities on contemporary television programming can be seen to adhere to, negotiate or challenge the hegemonic hierarchy. (p. 4)

Since gender and media studies and feminist media studies have often directed their focus on women's representations in different media outlets, men and masculinity are slightly overlooked in the media. Discussions on masculinity in the media are often not the main focus of the study but a small part of a larger project that focuses on gender relations in the media. It will be interesting to explore merely the representations of masculinity in the Afghan media and viewers' perceptions and interpretations of those representations.

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Appendix A

University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board Approval

File Number: 01-18-09

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 04/05/2018



Université d'Ottawa **University of Ottawa**
 Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Certificate of Ethics Approval
Social Science and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Rukhsana	Ahmed	Arts / Communication	Supervisor
Hosai	Qasmi	Arts / Communication	Student Researcher

File Number: 01-18-09

Type of Project: PhD Thesis

Title: Representations and Viewers' Perceptions of Gender Relations in Afghan Media: The Role of Media in Promoting Social Change in Afghanistan

Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Approval Type
04/05/2018	04/04/2019	Initial

Special Conditions / Comments:
 N/A

Appendix B

Focus Group Consent Form

Research Project Title: Representations and Viewers' Perceptions of Gender Relations in Afghan Media: The Role of Media in Promoting Social Change in Afghanistan

Research Investigator:

Hosai Qasmi
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Research Supervisor:

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Canada

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the above-mentioned research study conducted by Hosai Qasmi, under the supervision of Dr. Rukhsana Ahmed, as a requirement for the fulfilment of her doctoral degree.

Purpose of the Study: This study aims to explore media's portrayal of gender relations and their role in challenging the representations of traditional gender roles and to understand how viewers perceive those representations and how can media be leveraged to challenge traditional representations of gender relations in Afghan media and act as agents of social change.

Participation: My participation will consist of completing a written socio-demographic questionnaire and attending a focus group to respond to a number of questions related to soap operas I like and dislike to watch on Tolo TV, my views about them, and their portrayal of gender roles. The focus group will last approximately between 90 to 120 minutes and will be audio recorded.

Risk: I have received assurance from the researcher that there are no risks involved in participating in this study and no discomfort are associated with the study. If, however, for some reason I feel uncomfortable during the focus group discussion, I have received assurance from the researcher that my participation is voluntary, I am free to withdraw at any time during the focus group. However, the data collected cannot be withdrawn due to the nature of focus group discussions, but my identity will remain anonymous. I have also received assurance that I am free to refuse to answer any questions that may cause any discomfort.

Benefits: I will receive no direct benefit from participation; however, the information that I will share can contribute to a better understanding of media's portrayal of gender relations and their role in challenging traditional gender roles and representations in Afghan society. It can also help in developing recommendations on how media outlets can promote social change through their programs.

Compensation: I will receive \$ 10 as a token of appreciation for my participation in the focus group discussion.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: I understand that the content will only be used for the writing of a Ph.D. dissertation and that my confidentiality will be protected by the fact that only the researcher and research supervisor will have access to the data. Anonymity will be protected by the removal of any identifying characteristics from the data during the analysis and reporting stages. Everyone will be asked to respect the privacy of the other group members. All participants will be asked not to disclose anything said within the context of the discussion. However, I have been made aware that my confidentiality and anonymity cannot be entirely guaranteed because the focus group is a group activity.

Conservation of Data: The data collected, including audio recordings, electronic and print versions of transcripts, and electronic and print field notes will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet in the supervisor's office until 2022 and only the researcher and supervisor will have access to the data.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate, and if I choose not to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all the collected data will be used because of being part of the group data.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and received my answers to any questions I asked. I consent to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Hosai Qasmi Ph.D. candidate at the Institution of Feminism and Gender Studies, Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, University of Ottawa under the supervision of Dr. Rukhsana Ahmed Associate Professor in the Department of Communication, University of Ottawa.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor. And if I have any questions regarding the ethics conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5

Tel: +1 (613) 562-5387

Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participants name (printed): _____

Participant's signature:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date:

Appendix C

Focus Group Invitation Letter

Hello,

This is Hosai Qasmi a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Feminism and Gender Studies of the University of Ottawa. I am conducting a research study as a requirement for fulfilling my Ph.D. degree. The title of the study is 'Representations and Viewers' Perceptions of Gender Relations in Afghan Media: The Role of Media in Promoting Social Change in Afghanistan,' which will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Rukhsana Ahmed at the Department of Communication, University of Ottawa.

The purpose of this letter is that we are looking for participants; both male and female, to share their experiences and views on watching soap operas Afghan television stations. The purpose of this study aims to understand how viewers react to representations of gender relations and how media can challenge traditional representations of gender relations in Afghan media and be a medium of social change, and your views will help me in understanding how viewers receive and interpret gender relations represented in transnational soap operas on Afghan television stations. During the focus group discussion, you will be asked to share your experiences and views on watching soap operas. Participants will receive \$10 as token of appreciation for their participation in the study.

The focus group discussion will be conducted in Dari and will last approximately 90 to 120 minutes. The focus group discussion sessions for female and male participants will be conducted separately.

If you were willing to participate and share your thoughts with us, we would be glad to have you in a focus group discussion session that will be audio recorded. Before starting the focus group discussion, you will be asked to sign a consent form indicating that you agree to participate and allow audio recording. Your identity during focus group discussion and writing the Ph.D. thesis will remain anonymous. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you initially wish to participate but change your mind later, you will be able to withdraw from the study. However, once the focus group has been completed, data cannot be withdrawn. It will not be possible to withdraw the data collected due to the nature of the group discussion. It will not be possible for the researcher conducting the analysis to “forget” what she has heard in the focus group. However, your identity will remain anonymous.

All participants will be selected on first come first serve basis.

If you would like to take part in the focus group discussion session, please let me know by contacting me by email.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you,

Hosai Qasmi

Ph.D. Candidate

Institute of Feminism and Gender studies

University of Ottawa

Appendix D

Focus Group Discussion Protocol

Date: _____

Group Interviewed: _____

Interview Completed by: _____

Hello,

I am Hosai Qasmi Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Feminism and Gender Studies of the University of Ottawa. I would like to thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group and sharing your thoughts and views about some soap operas broadcast on Afghan television channels. This focus group is part of my Ph.D. dissertation data collection process. The data collected from today's focus group discussion will help me to understand how viewers perceive and react to representations of gender relations on transitional soap operas and how media can challenge traditional representations of gender relations in Afghanistan and be a medium of social change. Our purpose in meeting with you today is to learn your thoughts, feelings, and experiences representations of gender relations in transnational soap operas.

Anything you share with me today in this focus group discussion session will remain confidential. Nothing you say will be personally attributed to you in any reports that result from this focus group. Your participation in this focus group/ is totally voluntary.

Are you willing to answer our questions?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Appendix E

Focus Group Discussion Questions

Role:

1. Can you please share your views with me on how important do you think media are in people's lives?
2. What role do you think television plays in your daily life? Growing up and now?
3. Can you talk about the shows you like and dislike? What you like the most about them and what is that you don't like and explain why?
4. Can you please specify who/what are your favourite characters and why?
5. After watching these shows do you discuss them with friends or family? If yes, how often do you talk about them and what topics do you discuss more often? Can you share some stories and examples of your discussions?

Viewers' Perceptions:

1. According to you, do you think media can shape viewers' perceptions? If yes, how? If no, why not?
2. According to you, do you think the content of soap operas can shape people's views about gender roles and relations? If yes, how? If no, why not?
3. In your opinion, are the content of these shows important for society? If yes, how and why? If no, why not? Please provide some examples.
4. Do you think some of the content of these shows or the way they show family and social relations can be harmful for society? If yes, how and why? If no, why not? Please provide some examples.
5. Are there any characters and/or events that you think resemble your real life or someone in your life? If yes, how closely do you think the characters and/or events resemble your real life or someone you know? If no, how? Please provide example(s).
6. Do you think the shows resemble the society you live in? If yes, how closely do you think they resemble the society? If no, why not? Please explain.

7. Do you think you or someone you know ever followed any advice or information provided in these shows? If yes, what were those advices and why did you follow them? If no, why not? Please provide example(s).
8. Are there any particular characters from soap operas that you or someone you know may want to be like or relate to? If yes, who and why? If no, why not?
9. Are there characters that you do not related to? If yes, who and why? If no, why not?
10. Most of the soap operas are about family dynamics and relations; how do you think they represent and portray family relations? For example, between couples, sisters and brothers, fathers and daughters and sons?
11. Do you think contents of soap operas can shape people's behaviour towards each other? (For example, couples' responses to each other or their interaction or men and women's behaviour towards each other and themselves?)
12. Do you find these shows shape you in anyway? If yes, how? If no, why not?
13. Looking at these soap operas how do you think men and women and their relationships are being presented? How realistic or believable do you think these presentations are? Do they make sense to you? If yes, how and why? If no, why not? Please provide example(s)?
14. Do you notice any difference between how female characters are treated or represented, compared to male characters? If yes, what differences do you see? How are they represented differently? If no, why not? Please provide some examples.
15. How would you like male and female characters and their relationships to be shown in media?
16. Do you feel like you or someone around you often follows the behaviours of male and female characters you see on television? If yes, what characteristics you follow and why? If no, why not?

Social Change:






1. If you were asked to change something about the programs you like or dislike, what would you change? Specifically, in their content or structure? If yes, what and why? If no, why not? Please explain.
2. Do you think afghan media can do better with presenting family and social relations between women and men? If so, how?






3. What do you think the media in Afghanistan can do better in terms of helping to achieve equality between women and men in the society?
4. How do you think media in general and these program in particular can show family and social relations in which men and women are equal?
5. In your opinion, using a different image (i.e., non-traditional) of women and men roles in family or society can convey a better sense of the gender dynamics? For example, in a story about unemployment as a social problem portraying a woman would be more appropriate than a male character, seeking job? If yes, how and why? If no, why not?
6. Do you have any questions for me or is there anything else you would like to add?




Appendix F

Characters Description

Paiman

Name	Role Description	Photo
Hulya	She is the lead female character. She comes from a poor family. She is married to Karim and has three children.	
Karim	He is lead male character. He comes brought up in a rich family. He married Hulya and has three children.	
Husain	He is Karim's elder brother. He is married to twice. Now Married to Zainab and has a daughter.	
Zainab	She is married to Husain and a daughter and expecting her second child. She was divorced but remarried her ex-husband, Husain.	
Bairam	Bairam is a successful business owner. He is married to Suhaila. He cheated on Suhaila two times and has a daughter from one of his relationships who now lives with them. He has two sons, Karim and Husain	

<p>Suhaila</p>	<p>Suhaila is married to Bairam. She has two sons, Karim and Husain. She accepted her husband's daughter from his affair with another woman. she is a homemaker.</p>	
<p>Bada</p>	<p>Bada is Bairam's daughter from one of his extra-marital affairs. She is a student.</p>	
<p>Khadija</p>	<p>She is Bairam's sister and lives in the village.</p>	
<p>Atif</p>	<p>He is the driver and trusted employee of Bairam and his family. He is married partner of Nila</p>	
<p>Nila</p>	<p>Nila who is a homemaker. She is married to Atif and expecting her first child.</p>	





Maher	He is Hulya's friend and partner in crime	 A close-up portrait of a man with dark hair and a goatee, looking slightly to the right.
Kaya	Kaya is Hulya's friend and he owns a restaurant.	 A close-up portrait of a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a light-colored shirt, looking towards the camera.
Jeena	Jeena works with Kaya at the restaurant.	 A close-up portrait of a woman with dark hair, looking towards the camera.





Source: Hayat Sarkisi. (2016, February 09). Retrieved from:
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5302120/?ref_=nv_sr_srs_g_0.

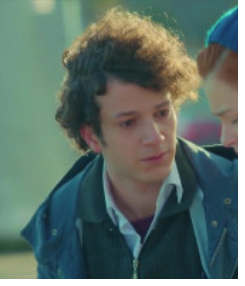




Appendix G

Characters Description

Qesay Maa

Name	Role Description	Photo
Filiz	She is the main female character of the soap opera. She is the elder sibling and deals with the responsibilities and providing better life to her family. She is love interest of Barish and Jamil.	
Barish	He is the main male lead of the soap opera. He belongs to a gangster family. He is in love with Filiz.	
Jamil	He is a police officer. He is in love with Filiz and in constant rivalry with Barish over Filiz.	
Fikri	Fikri is Filiz's father. He is addicted to alcohol.	

<p>Shayma</p>	<p>Shayma is a homemaker. She is Mujde's mother. She is obsessed with cleanliness. Her ex-husband is Hashim who lives with her and is paralyzed.</p>	
<p>Tulay</p>	<p>Tulay is Filiz's friend and neighbour. She baby sits her siblings when Filiz is away. She is Married to Tufan and facing infertility problems.</p>	
<p>Tufan</p>	<p>Tufan is married to Tulay. He owns a café.</p>	
<p>Rehmet</p>	<p>He is Filiz's brother. He is in high school and provides tutoring to school students.</p>	

<p>Hikmet</p>	<p>He is Filiz's brother and a high school student. And works at a local grocery store.</p>	
<p>Mujdeh</p>	<p>She is Shayma's daughter and high school student. She is Rehmet's love interest.</p>	
<p>Muzeh</p>	<p>She is Mujde's classmate. Hikmet and she are in pretending relationship.</p>	
<p>Esra</p>	<p>She is Hikmet's love interest. Esra is a domestic violence victim.</p>	
<p>Fikret</p>	<p>Filiz's younger brother</p>	

Kiraz	Filiz's younger sister	
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Source: Our Story. (2017, September 14). Retrieved from:
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7226940/?ref=fn_al_tt_1.

Appendix H
Summary of Watched Episodes

Paiman	
Episode One	<p>Suhaila, who learned that her husband Bairam had a relationship between another woman decides to get divorce. Bairam wants to regain Suhaila's trust and decides to remarry her. The biggest reaction of Bairam and Suhaila's divorce comes from Husain and Karim. They do not want their parents to get divorced. Karim and Husain leave the house and say that their father will never see them again. Karim plans a plot for Hulya and Mahir to teach them a lesson and stop them from their misadventures. Hulya finds out that Karim was acting his kidnapping, and this creates issue between them. Hulya and Karim constantly try to prank each other as revenge. Husain realizes that he had made a big mistake of leaving Zainab for Melek. He tries to get back with Zainab, however, she does resist getting back with Husain. Zainab learns that she is pregnant with Husain's child which affects her decisions. Zainab shares this news with Hulya first and wants her to keep the secret but Hulya cannot keep this secret and shares it with Karim who informs everyone. Husain after finding out that Zainab is pregnant decides to remarry Zainab. This occasion reunites the whole family, and they get engaged by Husain putting a ring on Zainab's hands.</p>
Episode Two	<p>Everyone is happy with Husain and Zainab's decision of getting married and their second child. However, their daughter Jarand does not take this news very well. Arda, Atif's nephew buys gifts for the family members from his first salary. He finds out from Nila that his mother is socialising with men, which shocks him and Atif. On the other side, the revenge fight between Hulya and Karim continues. Karim tells Hulya that he has invited the whole family for the dinner so she should prepare food. Karim has also sent the cook on vacation to annoy Hulya and make her do all the house chores. Hulya goes to Kaya's restaurant and asks him to help her make the dinner. Hulya takes the food home and prepares the table but no one shows.</p>

	<p>Karim tells her he forgot to inform her that the dinner is cancelled. Husain announcing to Karim that Zainab and he are getting married in few days. Zainab shares the news with Hulya. Karim and Husain want to spend some time together and Hulya and wants to plan a party for Zainab before her wedding.</p>
Episode Three	<p>Zainab wants to be part of one of Hulya and Mahir's <i>missions</i>. Hulya tells her that she is pregnant, and she shouldn't do anything as such. Suhaila plans a plot to take revenge form Khadija, her sister-in-law living in the village. She sends a man to her house to scare her. Zainab and Husain come to pick Jarand from Suhaila and Bairam's house, but she refuses to go back home. Suhaila shows Zainab and Husain drawings made by Jarand that shocks everyone. Zainab gets worried seeing the drawings and decides to show take Jarand to a psychologist. Bairam after finding out that Zainab and Husain have taken Jarand to a psychologist, goes to meet the psychologist and tells him that the drawings were not Jarand's and he drew them all. Bairam has been using the situation of Jarand staying with them to get closer to Suhaila. He creates a scenario that Jarand has a mental condition as she draws problematic drawings. Bairam gets a call from Khadija about the attack on her and he goes to brings Khadija to Istanbul from the village. Husain and Karim go out for dinner and Hulya and Zainab are with their female friends. Women's party is very dull until Maher comes and brings dancers to perform. In the morning, Karim tells Hulya that they should stop their fight. Hulya says she was just having fun all this time why did he take it all seriously. She promises that she won't do anything now. Karim goes to meet Maher and tells him about Hulya and his fights. Maher tells him that Hulya won't leave him until she teaches him a lesson. He further adds that he thinks Hulya thinks Karim doesn't love her and she has some grudge for him. Maher suggests that Karim should do something that make Hulya forget about the past. Karim proposes Hulya to start over again. Police arrives and arrests Maher and Hulya. Hulya is left</p>

	<p>on bail. Karim is furious and asks Hulya to stop getting involved in misadventures and Hulya promises him to not get involved in anything.</p>
Episode Four	<p>Zaianb and Husain are back from their honeymoon. It is the month of Ramadan and everyone is preparing for Iftar (breaking the fast). Hulya is sad and remembers her sister Melek and her sacrifices for her and family. Hulya, Zainab, and Maher plan she has a mission for her. Since she has promised Karim not to get involved in anything, she wants Zainab to take over. They plan an interaction between Khadija and the therapist for their future togetherness. Nila comes to Kaya's restaurant to meet Hulya, Zainab, and Maher. She tells everyone that she is pregnant, and she is nervous. Hulya calls Atif to come to the restaurant so that Nila can give him the news. Karim and Husain take Bairam to the University construction site. Bairam tells them that the tool that he took from Saleh will decide if they should construct the university in the selected site or not. Bairam tells the story behind the tool and how he found the tool.</p>

Qesay Maa	
Episode One	<p>Rahmet and Hikmet are at Barish's house where they receive a car for Barish. Hikmet receives a message from Esra that she is in a problem and needs his help. Hikmet and Rehmat take the car to go and help Esra. Rehmet and Hikmet do not know that it is a stolen car, and police is looking for it. Jamil is on duty to look for this car. Jamil finds the car with Rahmet and Hikmet and finds out the car is stolen by Barish. Jamil promises the boys to help them. Barish and Filiz are out and when they return home, they find Kiraz, Fikri, and Ismet alone. Filiz gets worried for Rehmet and Hikmet. Barish goes to look for them and finds out they are at police station for the crime of stealing a car. Barish goes to the police station and asks Jamil to release the boys as they are innocent since he stole the car. Jamil puts a deal with Barish and asks him to leave the town and go</p>

	<p>far from Filiz in return for releasing the boys. Barish accepts the deal by Jamil and leaves the town without informing Filiz. Filiz finds a ring in Barish's bag and takes it as proposal for marriage.</p> <p>Rahmet is caught in a fraud in school. He takes exams for other students in return for money. Filiz finds out about it and they get into argument.</p>
Episode Two	<p>The Child Services officer who came to the Filiz's house finds the children and the house in a very poor condition. She tells Filiz and siblings that the children should be placed in the state dormitory as there is no parental guardianship and the house condition is not livable for children. But Filiz resists this decision and tells the officers that her parents do live with them. Filiz asks Hikmet to inform Barish but he is not home. Jamil arrives and sees Hikmet and asks him what is wrong. Jamil goes to help Filiz in convincing the office and describing the situation. Officer says they will re-evaluate their situation. Now Filiz and her siblings have to keep their father sober until the officers come back to show that they live a regular life.</p> <p>Barish has left the town without telling anyone because of his deal with Jamil, he can neither return to Filiz nor tell the situation to her.</p> <p>Fikret finds out about Hashim acting to be paralyzed and tries to tell Shayma. However, Shayma do not trust him and she throws him out of the house. Jamil, who has reached his goal with the abandonment of Barish from the neighborhood, is trying to get closer to Filiz. Filiz, on the other hand, is trying to keep his family together while enduring the pain of being abandoned by Barish.</p>
Episode Three	<p>Filiz is having hard time to find a way to bring her siblings back from the state dormitory. Filiz finds out that she can bring her siblings back if she gets married. She goes to look for Barish but cannot find him anywhere.</p> <p>Barish's mother comes to Filiz looking for Barish. After being blamed by Barish's mother for his going missing, Filiz gets in tears and decides to go to Jamil. Filiz asks Jamil for marriage. Filiz, who is proposing marriage to Jamil, is ready to do everything to take back her siblings. Jamil, whose has been dreaming to marry Filiz will try to make this marriage happen.</p>

	<p>In addition to finding a regular job and insurance, Filiz has to convince Fikri to give her the children's custody.</p> <p>Barish returns to the neighborhood after learning about children and wants to help Filiz. However, Filiz does not seem to forgive Barish. The court orders Filiz and Jamil cannot take custody until they are officially married.</p>
Episode Four	<p>Barish tells Filiz everything about himself and the reason for his decision to leave the town without informing anyone. After court's order Filiz decides to get married with Jamil. She informs her siblings and friend Tulay. No one is happy about this decision. Filiz convinces everyone that it is not a real marriage it is only to take children's custody and Jamil is helping her. Fikret and Kiraz call Barish informing him about Filiz and Jamil's wedding. Filiz goes missing from the wedding ceremony. Jamil is very furious and is looking for Filiz and Barish everywhere. Barish has taken Filiz out of the town to his cottage. Filiz tries to escape but Barish doesn't let her. On the other side, Shukran, Filiz's mother comes back. Shukran finds Fikret brings the children back home from the dorm.</p> <p>Barish keeps convincing Filiz that he loves and cares for her. Filiz wants to be with Barish but she also has to go back to get her siblings back. Filiz returns with Jamil to the town. Filiz says Jamil has helped her and she cannot betray him.</p>

Appendix I

Sample of Episodes

Bairam, Episodes Transcript and Notes

Karim plays a prank on **Hulya** to teach her lesson. He goes missing and sends message to **Mahir** showing he has been kidnapped. **Mahir** tells **Hulya** that he thinks Karim is kidnapped. **Hulya** is stressed and goes to find Karim to the address sent to **Mahir**. **Mahir** and **Hulya** arrive at the address and see a small cottage they break through the door of the cottage and find Karim there safe. **Hulya** runs towards him and hugs him. **Karim** says he did all this to teach her a lesson. But **Hulya** is very upset and insists Karim should go and see a psychiatrist and she has already booked an appointment for them – Karim and Mahir.

Hulya is wearing heels she is a thin female who meets all the standards of western beauty. Her waist skin shows so therefore it is blurred for censorship purposes.
Mahir does not fit the hegemonic masculinity traits he is most of the time with Hulya planning and plotting. He is not taken serious by Karim too.

Karim and Mahir go to the therapist. They both argue in front of the therapist. **Mahir** calls **Hulya** boss. [The therapist is a male].
 The therapist asks **Mahir**, what you and your boss do?
Mahir: we work in the sector of tourism.
Karim interferences and says: no, they are mafia. I swear they are mafia.
Mahir is portrayed as different than other male characters. He is mostly seen among women busy planning, plotting and gossiping with them. He is treated differently and childlike. He doesn't conform to hegemonic masculinity. He doesn't have a job and what he does for life is unclear.

Hulya is at home with her son and talking to herself (imagining talking to Karim): this is just the beginning. See what happens as we go. This is me whom you are dealing with.
 And her may be 1-year old son looks at her in strange way.
Hulya: my darling, I am not saying this to you. I am sorry. Do you know what happened? When I was coming home a crazy person scared me and I got angry. I said all this to him not you. You eat this my sweetheart soon. You now we should do. We will go and see where is your sister **Bahar**. She is down stairs.
Hulya is wearing a pair of ripped jeans. Her knees, showing, are being blurred. Blurring the bare body parts of women further drew my attention as a viewer to the body part being blurred rather than to the acting and story. Is it a covert sexual objectification of women's body?

Bairam and **Sohaila** are out with their granddaughter. The granddaughter insists on buying sweets and **Bairam** agrees.
Sohaila says: Bairam she just had an ice cream no more sweets. It isn't good for her.
Bairam: it is not bad. Let her eat. I want her happiness. And he buys her sweets.
Granddaughter: will you love me after new baby arrives.
Bairam: off course I will. You will always be my sweetest granddaughter. Now go to your grandmother.
Sohaila: oh, come to me my sweetie. Let me clean your hands. You are a beautiful girl so your hands should be clean too.
Sohaila cleans her granddaughter's hands and tells her that since she is beautiful, she should be clean.

Ersa: oh Nothing. You know **Asim** and I Fight all the time. I just got a little scared and panicked and sent you the message. That's it.
Hekmat: That's it?

And he leaves. As he leaves **Ersa** starts crying and takes her medicine to apply on her wounds that she was hiding.

While talking to Ersa one could see the dominant masculinity in Hikmet's behaviour. Although he is portrayed as a quiet and introvert person but when talking to Ersa his tone changed. He was showing a dominant behaviour towards the woman he is in love with and Ersa was responding to him very quietly. Ersa is a victim of domestic violence. She hides her wounds, but everyone knows what she is going through. On the other hand, the show also portrays love relationship between a young boy and a woman who is older, which can be a shocking and sensitive issue but also challenging the gender normativity.

Next day **Hikmet** goes to the store and tries to tell **Ersa** something (his feeling for her) but a customer comes to the store and their conversation reminds incomplete. While **Ersa** is out Hikmet finds the letter, he wrote to her in her bag. In the letter Hikmet expressed his feelings to her. He presumes that since the letter is still with **Ersa** she might have read it and is hiding it from her husband **Asim**. He believes that **Ersa** has same feeling for him since she read the letter but stayed quiet. He is happy and decides to not resign from his work at the store.
Demonstrating a relationship between a younger male and an older female is interesting which is definitely challenging normativity. But man's assumption that if a woman doesn't say anything she probably is agreeing or accepting is sexist and problematic.

Ejiz's house is too old and nothing works there. The house needs to be repaired but since they don't have money to repair the house **Barish** helps them and repairs the house. Since the house was under maintenance **Barish** offered them his house for stay until the house is repaired. since they were in **Barish's** house for the time maintenance was going on. After the house is fully repaired, they all return to their house. When they come everything looks good from outside, but some things have not been repaired completely and again a chaotic morning starts for these siblings.

Ejiz finds out from **Rehmat's** teacher that he has been writing others' exams in return to money. All this can put **Rehmat** into trouble and he should stop and focus on his education more as he is very smart. **Ejiz** confronts **Rehmat** on the issue and tells him why is he doing it all? He responds that is how he is able to pay the bill else they would have nothing to eat. The argument heats up and **Ejiz** slaps **Rehmat** and **Rehmat** gets angry and leaves the house. When **Rehmat** leaves the house in anger **Hikmet** follows him and tries to bring him back home. At the same time **Barish** sees them and he comes out to check on them (*Barish is the savior. He solves all the problems*). **Rehmat** is upset that he stressed his sister and decides not to go back until **Ejiz** forgives him. While **Ejiz** seems to have already forgiven him. She is looking for him from the house window and seems regretting it. The siblings reunite and **Rehmat** assures **Ejiz** he won't do all this again and he will study hard for himself.

The relationship between brothers and sister demonstrated in the series is interesting. My experience is different than what I saw in the soap. I have seen brothers, despite their age younger or older than sisters, demonstrate a dominance and power over their sister, and they are encouraged to do so by families in Afghanistan saying 'you are the brother, the man of the

Hulya has fallen asleep on the couch. She wakes up and says: oh god I slept so long. The dining table is also not ready. Ali, why haven't you prepared the food yet.
Hulya goes to the kitchen to look for Ali the cook/servant. She sees Karim in the kitchen holding their son.
Hulya: what are you feeding my son Karim. He has his own food. Give him to me. Karim give the son to her. She asks Karim: where is Ali?
Karim: Ali is not here. He left his mother has an operation, so I gave him off for some days. You go prepare the dinner. I will go and take a shower. It will help with my body pain.
The first thing that came to Hulya's mind after waking up was cooking. Women only job is cooking.
When she was talking to Karim, he tells her to 'go do your work' by which he referred to cooking and preparing dinner. Gendered division of labour?

Hulya: why dear husband? What happened? **Karim**: I think my ribs are broken. **Hulya**: ohhooo. **Karim**: hot water helps. **Hulya**: ok. Your ribs are broken but you can hold Memo (their son). Karim. Memo! Memo is not that heavy? Anyways I am leaving you also get your work done (which is cooking and preparing food). **Hulya**: Memo you have a liar father. Did you see? He is a big liar (laughs).
Hulya pranks Karim by turning the hot water off when he is taking shower. When **Hulya** turn the water off.
Karim screams and calls her: **Hulya** come here. Where are? Can you hear me?
 She comes the female servant tells her that Karim is calling her may be the water is shut down. **Hulya** signals to her to stay quiet. At this moment Karim comes out which seems he is naked. The female servant sees him and hides herself.
[interesting point that Karim's naked body is not blurred for censorship. Only female bodies are to be blurred].

Hulya tells him: oh, why did you come out like this? Karim: then how should I come out? [very unbothered] There is no water.
Hulya: ok ok you go inside don't walk around like this. I will be back soon.
Karim: we live in a luxurious house and this happens.
Hulya goes to the kitchen and takes the fridge water out for Karim. She pours cold water on him. Karim is furious and tells her to bring normal water. But **Hulya** is smiling and he understands that **Hulya** has pranked him.
 [There is a constant prank fight between **Hulya** and Karim]
In a way challenging the power relation in heteronormative couples. Challenges the notions of dominate husband and subordinate wife.

Arda arrives at his uncle **Atif's** home. He sees his uncle's wife **Nila** and says, the world's most beautiful uncle's wife.
Nila: welcome.

Arda: see what I got you? Shows her the gift he got her. The uncle comes. **Arda** gives him his gift too. Uncle is not happy that **Arda** spent money and got everyone gifts.

Atif: Crazy man why you spend so much money. You don't have very high salary.
Arda: it is not over spending Uncle. My salary is better than the previous job. They gave us advance today so I thought should get you all something.

family' which gives them more authority. However, in this soap Ejiz's decision is respected and followed. Brothers may argue with her, but they regret doing anything that upsets her. There is a respect towards her decisions.

Behzad's smartness is displayed but we don't know how smart Ejiz is. Her intellectual capability is nowhere mentioned. Her representation is limited to personal and domestic spaces.

While they are trying to resolve the chaos in the house **Ejiz** (**Ejiz's**) gets hurt, the bathroom sink is broken and there is water everywhere. At this time the doorbell rings. **Ejiz** opens the door and sees a woman who is also shocked seeing all the chaos in the house.

Ejiz is always surrounded by issues and problems of others, siblings, parents, or Barish's, while others live their life despite the chaos. However, Ejiz's life dependents and is associated to others.

Ejiz asks: Hi who is this and whom are you looking for?

The woman: I am Childcare officer from Childcare services, and I am here to inspect children's living conditions. We received a report that children in this house have been living alone without their parents.

Ejiz: she is shocked and tries to convince her that the report is misleading, and it is not true.

Ejiz: no, the report is wrong. Our parents do live with us, but they are currently not home.

She tries to find their father, but he is found nowhere. **Ejiz** tells the Officer that she is engaged and soon she is getting married and will be living in a bigger house with all her siblings.

Ejiz sends **Hikmet** to find **Barish**, who has left the town as promised with **Jamil**. **Hikmet** knocks **Barish's** house door but he is not home. At the meanwhile **Jamil** passes and sees **Hikmet** looking for **Barish**.

Jamil asks him: are you looking for **Barish**?

He responds yes, but he is not home.

Jamil has an evil smile. He asks **Hikmet** why he is looking for him. **Hikmet** explains the whole situation to **Jamil** and **Jamil** goes with him to help.

While waiting for **Barish** and **Hikmet**, the officer tells **Ejiz**: you are too young to take care of kids; it is too much for you.

Ejiz replies. They are my sister and brothers.

At this moment **Hikmet** arrives with **Jamil**. **Ejiz** is shocked seeing **Jamil** there and not **Barish**. She asks **Hikmet** where is **Barish** he says he wasn't home.

Jamil talks to officer.

Jamil: Hello officer, I am **Jamil** the police officer. May I talk to you outside.

The officer: yes sure.

Jamil: I understand you are trying to do your job but there is a misunderstanding. I know this family for a long time we are neighbours and their parents live with them. I am the witness. But the officer says: how can I believe that. I didn't see the parents! they are nowhere to be found.

Ejiz says: yes, they are not here now.

Jamil: I know the family. They might be poor, but they are very close to each other. **Ejiz** takes care of his brothers and sister very well. Whoever gave you this information was wrong.

The officer believes **Jamil** and says: yes, such things happen sometimes. People call us with wrong information. And says they will be back to check on them and make sure everything is going well and their parents are there.

Appendix J

Sample of Coding Process

Soap Operas

Our Story Summary of Episodes

An unknown man comes to Barish's house looking for him. Barish is not home. Rehamt and Hikmet open the door. The man asks about Barish. They tell him he isn't here.
 He was but he isn't here now. Who are you?
 The man: I brought this car for him. Can I leave it here?
 H: Ok. Give me the keys!
 The man: it doesn't need keys. It has a start-up button. So, all is good.
 H: ok then.
 The man leaves. At this time Hikmet receives a message on Filiz's phone from Ezzat asking him to come as she is scared.

The house hold has one phone that is Filiz's and all of them use it. Ezzat is wife of the grocery store owner, Akbar, where Hikmet works after school. Hikmet is in love with Ezzat who the victim of domestic violence is and is always quiet and suffers quietly her husband, Akbar's, abuse.

Hikmet suggests to Rehamt that they should go and check on Ezzat to help her! They both take the car brought by the man for Barish. Rehamt is driving the car and he doesn't have driving license!

Jamil, the police officer and Filiz's lover, is on duty with his colleagues. They are driving and having conversation about how tired and hungry they are.
 The Colleague: I am very tired
 Jamil: I am very hungry. I home mother has prepare the meal!

While talking they get announcement from the police station about a stolen car being around the town. Jamil responds back to the office that he is in that area he will be alert.

Rehamt and Hikmet are not aware of the fact that they are riding a stolen car. When they are on their way to Ezzat's house Jamil sees the car and follows them ordering to stop the car.
 Police officers are mostly male. Most of the authority positions are male character.
 They both are caught by Jamil. Jamil is shocked seeing them in the car. When questioned they said they had no idea it was a stolen car. A man left in for Barish. Jamil understands that the car is for Barish. He knows that Barish belongs to a mafia family. He realizes that he can use the situation against Barish and separate Barish and Filiz. Jamil consults with his colleague that he should save the boys and tell the station that the boys found the car and informed them about it, and they are not involved in any crime. Jamil and his colleague argue, and his colleague says he won't be in this plan, but he won't let anyone! Jamil tells the boys to report in the police station that they found the car and informed Jamil about it. Boys follow Jamil's suggestion.

Barish and Filiz are out for a coffee. When they go home, they see boys are not home and kids are alone. Filiz gets angry and tries to call the boys but they don't respond. Filiz tells Barish, as she is concerned that boys might be in some trouble, to stay home with kids so that she can go and find them. Barish tells Filiz she should stay home with kids and he will go and look for the boys. Filiz accepts and Barish leaves!

Barish finds out about Rehamt and Hikmet and runs to the police station. There he finds Jamil and tells Jamil that the boys are innocent, and they should be free. Jamil asks him how he can say that. Barish says because he knows that, and the car is his and the boys had no idea and he is ready to take the blame and get the boys free. Jamil who has already set the situation to free the

Hasrat Qasbi Leadership/decisive

Hasrat Qasbi Need help/heed saving (Passive)

Hasrat Qasbi Responsibility to save the woman

Hasrat Qasbi Sense of valor and protector!

Hasrat Qasbi Fearlessness in Man!

Hasrat Qasbi Professional man

Hasrat Qasbi Jamil is shown working!

Hasrat Qasbi gendered division of labour/ mother ↓

Hasrat Qasbi gendered professions/inclusion ↓

Hasrat Qasbi Competitive/ dominant/decision maker!

Hasrat Qasbi Selfishness

Hasrat Qasbi woman as object!

Hasrat Qasbi Man supporting each other

Hasrat Qasbi Anger with care

Hasrat Qasbi Others/Submissive/ind/daring ↓

Hasrat Qasbi Parenting/being with children (woman)

Hasrat Qasbi Care and love/ care with practicality ↓

Hasrat Qasbi Deceptive men/ selfish

boys but doesn't tell Barish. He wants to use the situation and scare Barish so that he leaves the town and goes far from Filiz. He tells Barish he will free the boys and take care of the issue if Barish promises to leave the town and go away for ever!
 B: leave the boys they haven't done anything. They are innocent
 J: why should I believe you?
 B: they are innocent because I stole the car and I will report it. I leave them.
 J: really? You think you are very smart? There is no evidence that you have stolen. If you take the blame you will be freed. Your lawyer and prove there is no evidence of you being involved in it!
 B: they are important to me. I came here for them!
 J: I can't do anything.
 B: you are going to send them to the prison?
 J: it is not my fault; it is yours.
 B: ok you won. I will do anything you ask me; just leave them.
 J: Now we are talking. I want you to leave and for real for this time.
 Barish accepts the deal and leaves the neighbourhood and Filiz.
 Boys are freed and they see Barish at the station!
 R: Barish what are you doing here!
 B: I came here to find you both.
 R: But how did you know we were here?
 B: I will tell you everything now let's go.

Barish explains to the boys that Jamil called him letting him know about them.
 Rehamt and Hikmet hide the whole situation from Filiz. They lie to her about their whereabouts. After lying to Filiz, Rehamt and Hikmet talk to each other. They are not happy about lying to Filiz. They acknowledge that she works very hard to take care of them and she does a lot for them. But they lied so that she is not upset and concerned any further.

Barish is repairing Filiz's house and he needs money and asks his mother. His mother asks him does he need the money for that girl (Filiz). Hearing this Barish gets angry he says he doesn't need the money he will manage himself. But his mother stops him and tells him that she was just asking, and she will give him as much money as he wants. She calls her office and orders the transfer of the money to Barish. The mother clearly doesn't like Filiz as she thinks her son is changed because of her.

Filiz finds a ring in Barish's bag that she thinks is for her. Barish proposes Filiz before leaving.

Hasrat Qasbi Aggressive behavior (Male) confrontational behavior

Hasrat Qasbi Care/love/ family/ personal

Hasrat Qasbi Sacrificing man

Hasrat Qasbi Submit to protect (Barish)

Hasrat Qasbi Competition between men – woman object/objectification

Hasrat Qasbi Others/ protector/self!

Hasrat Qasbi Competitive/ selfish

Hasrat Qasbi Care/love/family/ but once the problem is dealt they hide!

Hasrat Qasbi Man asking help from woman but not desperate for the help

Hasrat Qasbi Unknown hatred between women/jealousy

Hasrat Qasbi Blaming women by women/damning women

Hasrat Qasbi Domestic woman who is always busy cleaning, cooking, and doing house chores. She is obsessed with cleanliness and even cleans her guests' clothes before allowing them to enter her house. Her ex-husband is Hashim who is planning to end at her house and she is taking care of him. She is portrayed as a very naive and simple character who is tricked by her ex-husband and she can't find that out.

Hikmet, who decides to resign from the store, he goes to the store to ask Ezzat what happened to her and why did she sent the message asking help! He asks her: what did he do?
 Ezzat: what?

Hasrat Qasbi Dominant/ protector/ sacrificing woman!

Palman Summary	Daddy's lion
Palman Summary	good job my lion.
Palman Summary	Husain: my daughter.
Palman Summary	Husain: my princess.
Palman Summary	Husain: oh, my dear I missed you so much. You have grown up a lot my daughter.
Palman Summary	We are related to the girl (doesn't have a name?).
Our Story Summary	Emotional
Our Story Summary	Barish gets into an accident and Filiz goes to find him with other family members.
Our Story Summary	Filiz after learning that she can have her siblings back from the foster house if she demonstrates to the officials that she has a functional family and is married and can legally adopt her siblings, she decides to go to Jamil. Since Barish has disappeared and Filiz thinks he has betrayed her, she decides to talk to Jamil.
Our Story Summary	Filiz is very worried about Barish's whereabouts. She tries to call him, but his phone is out of reach.
Our Story Summary	Filiz is worried about all the situation and doesn't know how to take care of it all. Jamil assures her that they will find a way to deal with all this. He tells Filiz she can call him anything they need anything.
Our Story Summary	Filiz is found and Fufan brings him back; he is drunk. Filiz is furious at her father and screams at him. Filiz faints and Rehamt who is also angry and sad and blames his father for everything throws him out of the house.
Our Story Summary	Kiraz is very well welcomed by girls. They offer her help to settle down. She has already found friends.
Our Story Summary	Rehamt came to Shayma asking her the favour to act their mother for the day the officers are coming. She is happy to do it. Rehamt assures her that she is not forced. She doesn't have to do it if she doesn't want. But she says she is happy to help and to pay back the favour to Filiz.
Our Story Summary	Rehamt tell Shayma that she is very nice, and he wishes she was their mother. Shayma gets emotional and happy hearing that.
Our Story Summary	Shayma is once again in the kitchen. She is worried about Fiki whom she threw out for saying that Hashim is fine and he is playing with her. She blames herself for him going missing. While she is worried for Fiki she is more worried for her cake being burnt.
Palman Summary	Suhaila: we can't be happy even a day. Bairam: stop it. Leave your women talk. There isn't anything wrong. Husain has been calling their lawyer.

Data	Code	Coded Text
Our Story Summary	Aggressive	Fikret is bullied on his first day at the dorm by boys. He is not welcomed by them. Fikret is scared. While, Kiraz is very well welcomed by girls. They offer her help to settle down. She has already found friends.
Palman Summary		Kara looks at Maher and they smile and tell the guy: good job, good job my lion.
Palman Summary		Maher: don't talk stupid else will beat you badly. Kara: listen don't try to act like a hero! BF: it isn't that easy. Try to beat me come on.
Palman Summary		Want you say No, right. Listen if you are saying no there are many stones here, I will break your head (laughs and everyone laughs). Husay: Ok, K. OK! She says yes.
Our Story Summary	Appearance	Rehamt says, well it is normal [for them]. Hikmet says, you haven't seen that woman that's why you are talking is so lightly. Rehamt asks, how was she? Hikmet says, she was very scary, like horror movies. One could not look at her face.
Palman Summary		the world's most beautiful uncle's wife.
Palman Summary		I want your beautiful daughter Husay to my handsome son
Palman Summary		Karim: you look very nice tonight. Husay: thank you very much
Palman Summary		Let me see you. Honeymoon treated you well. You are looking very beautiful.
Palman Summary		Zainab: I think I need to recheck my weight. I mean I have to now (laughs and puts her hand on her belly).
Palman Summary		Zainab: oh, sister in law. My appetite is increasing. I'm concerned about my weight gain.
Our Story Summary	Competition	J: I can't do anything. B: you are going to send them to the prison? J: it is not my fault; it is yours. B: ok you won. I will do anything you ask me; just leave them. J: Now we are talking. I want you to leave and for real for this time.

Palman Summary	Zainab: Oh god I am going mad. Father why did police take Husay. Suhaila: I wish you had gone with them Mr. Bairam. Bairam: Wait Suhaila why are you stressing too much. I sent the lawyer to take care of everything. We will know about all in a while.
Our Story Summary	Enduring sufferings
Our Story Summary	As he leaves Ezra starts crying and takes her medicine to apply on her wounds that she was hiding.
Our Story Summary	Filiz gets angry and shouts on her father. But still tries to control herself and says, baba for once listen to me and do something for us. I need you!
Our Story Summary	Filiz is committed to get everything back to normal for which she has even get married to Jamil for real.
Our Story Summary	Jamil calls Filiz telling her that he looked for Barish and found that he has left the city. Filiz is upset but doesn't tell anyone anything.
Palman Summary	Hulya is upset. Hulya remembers her sister and the sacrifices she did for her and her family. Her sister works number of jobs so that Hulya can get education. Their father being an alcoholic. Her sister has most of the responsibility.
Our Story Summary	gendered division of labour
Our Story Summary	Tulay comes over looking for Filiz. Filiz is not home. Jamet asks Hikmet that he needs to go to toilet but Hikmet, since he doesn't know how to deal with taking care of a child, he tells him to hold it. Tulay says, what are you saying? Can you hold? You are telling him to hold. And she takes him to the toilet.
Palman Summary	Anyways I am leaving you also get your work done [which is cooking and preparing food]
Palman Summary	Karim: All is not here. He left his mother has an operation, so I gave him one for some days. You go prepare the dinner. I will go and take a shower.
Palman Summary	She sees Karim in the kitchen holding their son. Husay: what are you feeding my son Karim. He has his own food. Give him to me. Karim: give the son to her.
Our Story Summary	Hate without reason
Our Story Summary	Barish's mother comes to Filiz looking for his son. She clearly doesn't like Filiz and blames Filiz for her son being missing. She asks Filiz, call Barish, Filiz says she thought he was with her, she says it is not a good joke just go and call him. Filiz says it isn't any joke he is not here. She blames Filiz and says it is all because of you. Filiz: because of me? Her; yes, you came into his life from nowhere I warned him that it was too much for him to handle but he didn't listen. Now he can say: Fi. Run away! Her: yes, he came to me to say good bye and left. If he calls you tell him to call me.
Our Story Summary	Filiz comes to meet Jamil's mother, as he wanted. The mother tells Filiz she has heard that she knows filiz was engaged to someone else and she warns her to not upset his son.

Our Story Summary	Jamil comes to check if Barish is back. When he sees he is not at his apartment he is certain that he has left the town and fulfilled his promise. He talks to himself saying, did you see Sawa. [Barish] how it is done. This is my place I can throw you anytime.
Our Story Summary	Confident
Our Story Summary	Hikmet explains the whole situation to Jamil and Jamil goes with him to help.
Our Story Summary	Rehamt confronts Jamil and tells him they know he used them. Jamil says he shouldn't believe Barish more than him
Our Story Summary	Rehamt tells Hikmet all about Barish and how Jamil used them to send Barish away. They both go to Barish to find out the whole truth.
Our Story Summary	The man asks about Barish. They tell him he isn't here. He was but he isn't here now. Who are you? The man: I brought this car for him. Can I leave it here? H: Ok. Give me the keys. The man: it doesn't need keys. It has a start-up button. So, all is good. H: ok then.
Palman Summary	Karim: leave it! Dad you haven't heard the real news my brother has decided to get married to Zainab on Tuesday. Bairam: oh, congratulations to my son. Take your wife and go for honeymoon wherever you want. It is a gift from me. But Barish will stay with us.
Palman Summary	This mining tool was the invention of Saleh. Bairam asked Saleh to give him this tool in return to money. Saleh rejected on selling it. Since he was angry with him about Bairam's proposal to Amina, Hulya's mother. Both the friends were in love with the same woman, Amina. When Saleh rejected to sell the tool to Bairam, Bairam as a revenge act when and got engaged to Amina and stole the tool. Husain said you ruined all his dreams. Bairam said I improved him. When I was young, I was very strong like a lion. Bairam leaves Amina in return to this tool. He exchanges Amina with the tool with Saleh.
Our Story Summary	construct jealousy among women
Our Story Summary	Hikmet meets muzeze, mujide, and rehamt at their old school in the town. Rehamt tells Muzeze and Mujide that he and his brother have a lot to talk about as they are meeting for some time, so they want to be with each other. Muzeze says, off course. Rehamt looks at Mujide and tells her, see, this is how you should be learning from her.
Palman Summary	Hulya says Zainab is not fully ready and needs work. But Maher is happy with what she did. Zainab: Hulya doesn't want anyone to work with Maher that's why. Maher: yes, because she is jealous.

Focus Group Discussions

Group	Code	Sub Code	Colored Text	Color Codes
FGD_1 Transcript	create family issues		<p>If a woman does some as they do in soaps it ruins the entire family system. (quite aggressively said)</p> <p>they have effect on family relations.</p> <p>Despite Turkey being an Islamic country, the different traditions and customs that we have here are very different than there. For example, the freedom that is given to women there (Turkey) or the way they dress, women's dressing and men's dressing, are very different. Therefore, when a person from a rural population or less education or uneducated individual sees it cannot understand it adopt the positive aspects, which results in higher expectations and the male in the family could not accept their wishes and develop conflict and problems in the family.</p> <p>HQ, was it because of these soap operas and their content?</p> <p>Participant 6: yes, all because of these soap operas.</p> <p>It (the soaps) have increased the percentage of divorce.</p> <p>It has influence on family setting and family environment. For example, you see a man in a soap opera who works in an office and has an affair with his secretary. Now when an ordinary man goes to office and comes home, and his wife has seen such serials and have been influenced by it. She will doubt her husband. If during an unofficial time he gets a call, his boss calls him and he leaves the room, she will doubt him and have thoughts going on in her mind.</p> <p>the divorce issues. In these Turkish soaps for example you see a girl marries a boy then divorces him then she goes to another man and again divorces him. It is like that right? (looking at other participants validates it). Here these soaps have caused many family issues.</p> <p>we have a neighbor he is an advocate. he broke three sets of television one night. He brought them all out of the house one night and broke them. Now they don't have any television set at home.</p>	Female Male
FGD_3 Transcript	decoding		<p>Participant 3: I am unaffected about them.</p> <p>Participant 5: since I am neutral about them haven't really thought why I like or dislike them.</p>	
FGD_1 Transcript		finding the character in life	<p>my daughter to her aunt that Aam (refers to father's sister in Dari language) you looked like Simaz.</p> <p>There is a female lead and my daughter tells to one of her uncles, that is my sister, that she is like Simaz who always marries.</p>	
FGD_3 Transcript			<p>Participant 2: you'll know someone who is exactly like Farhad's character in a Turkish soap operas is that soap about five sisters, who is the evil among them, she would follow her the way she dressed, and put make up on. Yes, there are many people like that.</p>	
FGD_2 Transcript		low level of understanding	<p>I want to add something here. Afghan people, I won't generalize and can't say what percentages too but whatever is shown in a soap they adopt the negative aspects of it but do not realize that the reason for showing a negative thing is that people learn from it. But in Afghanistan people think that whatever is shown is right. The positive aspects are not adopted only the negative things shown are imitated.</p> <p>Participant 1: for example, husband drinks alcohol in a Turkish soap and drink beats his wife and says well I am the man. There is a soap called Molar (mother).</p>	

FGD_2 Transcript	women portrayal	<p>Participant 1: From my perspective, I want a woman who is so powerful and strong and dominates all men, because in Afghanistan since today men have dominated and governed and women were subordinated. I want to create a soap opera where woman's power is more than a man's power. That's how I want it.</p> <p>Participant 1: it differs in every soap opera and every story. For instance, in one soap you will see woman is portrayed very strong and powerful and</p> <p>Participant 2: and then there are stories where woman is very weak and victim of violence and abuse.</p> <p>Participant 1: they show that there are women who can be leader, powerful and some who do not have opportunities and have been facing violence how they live.</p> <p>Participant 2: even if they see women in such situation people can learn from that too. Why should you have such a life?</p> <p>Participant 1: every person has some potential.</p> <p>Participant 2: when I see such women, I am life is short who should you live like this?</p> <p>Participant 2: If it is from my perspective, I will put a female in lead as the boss who would have others working under her and she trains them and provide them opportunities. So that when people watch they realize that women can be powerful too. Dominance is there but she should be able to attract other through her behavior.</p> <p>Participant 3: in contrary to the presented views, If I was to create a soap opera, for instance if it is about family, mostly soap operas are about family can't say that it is about a president etc. A man should be the lead of the family who respects everyone and considers everyone's rights, respect women in the family and respect their rights and should be a man who always works hard towards supporting his daughters, sisters, wife, or mother to achieve their dreams, help them and move forward together. And not only the man but the women should also cooperate so that the family setting is preserved, and both sides achieve their goals.</p> <p>Participant 2: but those watching such soap operas can interpret that women should always listen to men.</p> <p>Participant 3: No, I am not saying that.</p> <p>Participant 1: I have a disapproval about it. Woman also leave in the morning and works until 4:00 PM and man also leave for work and works until 4:00 PM. But then why the man comes home and complains that I'ma very tired and lays down and poor woman never says a word and goes to the kitchen and starts her chores. This is too much, like why? If I was to create a soap opera, I would show that if she goes cooking, he should help in cleaning the house; if...</p>
FGD_3 Transcript		<p>Participant 1: there is an Indian soap dubbed in Farsi called Roys-e-Sheren-e-Jawani (sweet dreams of youth). The female lead had a high position in work and at the meantime she was very active too. I saw her better than others who were mainly busy gossiping and or worshipping status. While she was against all these things.</p> <p>There are mostly two kinds of characters in these soaps, too passive or too wicked. A balanced character is almost unseen.</p>

FGD_2 Transcript	gender equality	<p>HQ: so according to you, equality should be portrayed in every aspect of life, be it family life or anywhere?</p> <p>Participant 1: yes, there should be equality. It shouldn't be as well I am the man. May be your wife had more busy day than you in the office.</p> <p>HQ (disagreement between the participant on this particular discussion was increasing so to avoid any conflict I had to interfere and redirect the discussion)</p> <p>So according to you, there should be gender equality. May be each of you had different words but meant that there should be gender equality. Being that men should not be involved in domestic violence and women should have power too.</p> <p>So all three of you agree on this?</p> <p>Participant nodding their heads and showing agreement.</p>
FGD_1 Transcript		<p>I think equality between men and women in many ways is slightly different than in many other societies.</p>
FGD_2 Transcript		<p>Participant 2: it is better to have awareness programs for both men and women. It is often that awareness is given to women who has gone through it, she has seen it practically and theoretically. It has significance. And if it is only for men, they will say OH/DOO they are trying to make women dominant on us. If both sides sit together and someone presents the information, perspectives can change. They might communicate with each other and I think will resolve the problem to some extent.</p> <p>Participant 2: unfortunately, men won't understand it. If I share an experience, a few weeks or days ago there was I don't exactly remember if it was a soap opera or a film. There was a young female who is getting married, she insists that she wants to be present in her Nikah ceremony (the vows ceremony. Culturally in Afghanistan women are not allowed in their vow's ceremony. They are represented by a male family member who negotiates on her behalf for her Mehler, the amount of money set for the women to be given by the man after marriage. The male representative also says the vows on her behalf). My husband changed the channel saying, 'cuse on you, you all are provoking women.' I was like see, their mindset is so narrow that they don't even want to see a woman to choose her future partner. I told him let me watch it what she says, he said 'leave it.' Now see how narrow their mindset is. They won't let such basic things, he told 'what is it that you are watching change it.'</p>
FGD_2 Transcript	gender equality through media	<p>Participant 1: even if it is portrayed in a soap, at the end of it they show that man had enough of it. Because he never wants his wife to be more powerful than him. Even if he is a good person he would never want it.</p> <p>Participant 1: like Ki & Ka, The Ki & Ka movie [an Indian movie that shows reverse gender roles, in contrary to traditional gender norms. The movie is a way to challenge the normative gender relations in male-dominated and patriarchal society]. But what I am say, Hosi, as men's DNA there is something that they will never accept it.</p> <p>Participant 2: that's how they are created.</p> <p>Participant 1: they should create their own content mostly [local content].</p> <p>Participant 2: they should cover issues such as for children, the psychosocial issues or for women. Content that are informative and educative.</p> <p>My perspective about media, and I can give an example too, if our media in general provide programs that are related to Afghan culture and resemble the lives and family settings of families in Afghanistan if media provide such shows and they portray and discuss gender equality and equality between men and women, I think they can play an important and significant role in promoting</p>
FGD_1 Transcript		

FGD_3_Transcript		As we all know, media are an important part of a society. They have their role be it cultural, political, or social. It can be seen as an entertainment tool too. What is more important is to understand the impact of media on people: it can a positive impact or negative impact. Worth mentioning that influence also differs in every society.
FGD_3_Transcript		Participant 1: To share my experience, during university days, I was very interested in political debates through Tolo News. It was very motivating in the sense that I wished to be able one day to participate in such debates on Television. So it stimulated me a lot to know about what is happening around me, be a political leader like them, or to know people around me. It influences me to start reading books and building my knowledge
FGD_3_Transcript		Participant 2: I agree with her. I think media have both positive and negative influence.
FDG_2_Transcript	inappropriate	However, there are some negative aspects to media too. For instance, some of the programs aired do not consider the moral attributes, which results, in developing societies like Afghanistan, to have negative outcome on ethics and personalities of youth and children.
FDG_2_Transcript		HQ: You just mentioned the ethics and moral issues; can you share an example and elaborate a little more? Participant 3: yeah for example, we if see in the most of soap operas and the Turkish soap operas that air on Afghan television networks and that are increasing rapidly, many children/youth find friends [girlfriends & boyfriends] on their way to school and while being unaware about it they go out together. And due to fear they do not share this with their parents, and it causes many major problems.
FGD_1_transcript		As we say they have made people shameless [chashem para].

FGD_1_transcript		since any soap opera you watch is all about love and love making, an individual is with someone then leaves him/her and goes to another person and then marries one person but later you find out has a child from another person. All these things and according to me, given our society, it is all immoral.
FGD_1_transcript		some of the families that I know after watching these soaps and their negative consequences decided not to watch television anymore or have limited their viewership to few Islamic television channels. They do not allow their families especially young girls and boys to watch it. They have limited few Islamic channels that are related to culture.
FGD_1_transcript	Inappropriate for women	Because our society is very traditional. A woman lives with her husband; the husband be good or bad, it is same till the end of the life.
FGD_3_Transcript		HQ: Why you think your husband doesn't like soap operas? Participant 2: he watches them but when he watches them in the evening around 6:00 pm, it is the time when I return home from work and I am busy either cooking, cleaning or laundering. HQ: So he watches them? Participant 2: he does watch them. HQ: with interest? Participant 2: with interest, yes.
FDG_2_Transcript	interest	I mostly like touristic shows and research series. Touristic shows because I think they motivates us, and a person needs motivation to grow. Also, research series, because I really like it. Since when one sees something shouldn't believe right away but should exploration and find if it is really the way it is shown.

FGD_1_transcript	cause family issues	If a woman does same as they do in soaps it ruins the entire family system. [quite aggressively said].
FGD_1_transcript		they have effect on family relations.
FGD_1_transcript		despite Turkey being an Islamic country, the different traditions and customs that we have here are very different than there. For example, the freedom that is given to women there [Turkey] or the way they dress: women's dressing and men's dressing, are very different. Therefore, when a person from a rural population or less education or uneducated individual sees it cannot understand it adopt the positive aspects, which results in higher expectations and the male in the family could not accept their wishes and develop conflict and problems in the family.
FGD_1_transcript		HQ: was it because of these soap operas and their content? Participant 6: yes, all because of these soap operas.
FGD_1_transcript		It [the soaps] have increased the percentage of divorce.
FGD_1_transcript		it has influence on family setting and family environment. For example, you see a man in a soap opera who works in an office and has an affair with his secretary. Now when an ordinary man goes to office and comes home, and his wife has seen such serials and have been influenced by it. She will doubt her husband. If during an unofficial time he gets a call, his boss calls him and he leaves the room, she will doubt him and have thoughts going on in her mind.
FGD_1_transcript		the divorce issues. In these Turkish soaps for example you see a girl marries a boy then divorces him then go marries another man and again divorces him. It is like that right! (looking at other participants validates it). Here these soaps have caused many family issues.

FGD_1_transcript		we have a neighbour he is an advocate; he broke three sets of televisions one night. He brought them all out of the house one night and broke them. Now they don't have any television set at home.
FGD_3_Transcript	decoding	Participant 3: I am unaffected about them.
FGD_3_Transcript		Participant 3: since I am neutral about them haven't really thought why I like or dislike them.
FDG_2_Transcript	dont like	I don't like news. Because in Afghanistan there always same news; here this number of people killed, there Taliban took over this province. There isn't anything new that could attract you so that you go and watch it.
FDG_2_Transcript		Participant 2: you follow it every day and nothing changes. That's why I have changed my routine and stopped watching news and political shows.
FGD_1_transcript	finding the character in life	my daughter to her aunt that Ama [refers to father's sister in Dari language] you looked like Simar.
FGD_1_transcript		There is a female lead and my daughter tells to one of her uncles, that is my sister, that she is like Simar who does magic.
FGD_3_Transcript		Participant 2: yes I know someone who is exactly like Farkhonda (a character in a Turkish soap opera) in that soap about five sisters, who is the evil among them; she would follow her the way she dressed, and put make up on. Yes, there are many people like that.

Appendix K

Final Codebooks

Codebook (Content Analysis)

Major Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Rep. of Gender Relations		patterns of social relations, power relations, and access and control over resources and/or interactions between different genders and sexes.
	Emotional vs Rational	Patterns of displaying different emotions - crying, happiness, sadness - and patterns of rationality - logic, sensibleness - among different genders and sexes
	Selfless vs Self-interested	Patterns of selflessness - sacrificing, giver to other, forgiveness - and patterns of self-interest - self-importance, self- regard among genders and sexes
	Domestic vs Professional	patterns of domesticity - family oriented, nurturer, stay at home/inside settings - and patterns of displaying professionalism - having a job, shown working at office, discussing work among different characters.
	Saviour vs Victim	Patterns of displaying saviour attitudes - saving others, being rescuer, protector - and patterns of being victim - being in need to rescue - among different characters
	Naïve vs Aware	patterns of naïveness - unaware, not able to deal with situations - and patterns of being aware - mindful, attentive, responsive - among characters.
	Dominant vs Submissive	Patterns of domination - showing power over others, deciding for others, assertiveness - and patterns of submissiveness - positivity, mildness - among characters
	Objectification	patterns of objectification in different ways such as sexually, as an object, or property to be owned.

	(Un)representable(s)	Lack of representation of certain groups and individuals. Neglecting and denying of their existence in society or considering them as deviant and unrepresentable. .
	Barriers broken but not demolished	attempts to defy traditional representations and stereotypes but not fully challenged them.
Rep. of Social Relations		patterns of social relations between different genders and sexes.
	females and males' relations	social relations between males and females
	males and males' relations	social relations between males.
	females and females' relations	social relations between females.

Codebook (FGDs)	
Major Themes	Description
Active Audience & Variety of Meanings	Active meaning making. Diversity in meanings. Diversity in interpreting and understanding a media text among participants.
Viewing Positions	display of different viewing position or different decoding positions such as dominant viewing, oppositional viewing, and negotiated viewing among participants.
Role of Gender in Receptions & Interpretations	looking at how participants' gender plays a role in the process of decoding media text.