

# Gender through Media: Images of Contemporary Masculinity in Two Pakistani Movies

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**Abstract:** Gender and its media representations inform us about a specific culture. This research paper is an in-depth qualitative study of the representations of contemporary masculinity and queerness in the Pakistani media and popular culture. The paper analyzes two Pakistani movies: Sarmad Khoosat's *Zindagi Tamasha* (Circus of Life) (2019) and Saim Sadiq's *Joyland* (2022). The aim of the study is to explore the concept of masculinity in the Pakistani society and its media representations in popular culture and cinema. Masculinity is interlinked with physical appearance, social norms and religious values in the Pakistani society, whereas queer behaviour is generally condemned because of cultural stereotypes and religious injunctions. The study analyzes the impact of social customs and stereotypes on the perception of masculinity in the male characters with special focus on the queer inclinations manifested in their behaviour. The analysis of the two movies is conducted through contemporary masculinity theories to identify current manifestations of masculinity in the Pakistani society through the media representations. The findings of the research indicate that contemporary masculinities in the Pakistani society and media depict a wide range of variation from hegemonic masculinity to hybrid masculinity, inclusive masculinity and queer masculinity.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Masculinity; Hegemonic; Inclusive; Hybrid; Queer.

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## 1. Introduction

The field of critical studies on men and masculinities is an emergent area of studies. Various definitions of masculinity and several theories on masculine identities are abounding in academia currently. Brian Wallis, Maurice Berger, and Simon Watson state in their book *Constructing Masculinities* that masculinity cannot be perceived as a "monolithic entity, but as an interplay of emotional and intellectual factors – an interplay that directly implicates women as well as men, and is mediated by other social factors, including race, sexuality, nationality, and class" (1995 p. 3). Whitehead and Barret define masculinity as "the behaviours, languages, and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with men and thus culturally defined as not feminine" (Whitehead & Barret, 2001, pp. 15-16). The aim of masculinity studies is not to "reinforce patriarchy" but to "challenge the myth that men in general benefit from it" along with celebrating "a multiplicity of masculine identities" (Hobbs 2013 p. 2). The current paper is a qualitative analysis of two Pakistani movies, Sarmad Khoosat's *Zindagi Tamasha* (Circus of Life) (2019) and Saim Sadiq's *Joyland* (2022). The purpose of the study is to understand the various forms of masculinity in contemporary Pakistani society as depicted in indigenous cinematic representations. The study aims to bridge the gap in the identification, analysis and categorization of currently prevalent masculine identities and forms in the Pakistani society and media representations. It is also directed towards adding to scholarly literature on Pakistani film industry.

Worldwide, there are changes in perceptions of masculinity. A study by Connor et al. analyzed middle class men between 16 and 25 in 33 scholarly papers to identify contemporary Western masculinities and the performance of masculinity according to the four criteria of emotional intimacy, inclusivity, physicality and resistance (Connor et al, 2021, p. 15). Their study posits that most young men "challenge orthodox masculinities" depicting an influence of Inclusive and Hybrid masculinities (Connor et al, 2021, p. 15). The present study examines the influence of contemporary Western masculinities in Pakistan. The paper analyzes the male characters according to the concepts of hegemonic masculinity, hybrid and inclusive masculinity, queer masculinity, caring masculinity and toxic masculinity. By situating the Pakistani representations and perceptions of masculinity within a broader context, the paper links local concerns with global trends.

Since Pakistan is an Islamic state the ideals of masculinity are also influenced by religion along with race, class and sexuality (Sara Ali, 2022, p. 28). In a study by Maleeha Aslam, *Islamism and Masculinity*, the author states that aggressive masculinity, generally considered as hegemonic masculinity, has been the hallmark of Muslim men before and after partition (Ahmed 2014 p. 140). The impact of Muslim countries' culture on Pakistani masculinity is also visible in the form of physical displays of religiosity like men keeping beards and women wearing long cloaks (Ahmed 2014 p. 143). In order to appropriate the study within a local context, the paper adopts a masculine identity scale for Pakistani context developed by Sara Imtiaz and Anila Kamal (2023).

## 2. Literature Review

Gender is a fluid and contested area of study with variations in its interpretation, representation and performance. This section highlights the notion of gender performativity, some key theories of masculine gender interpretation and its representation in media.

One of the ways to interpret gender can be gleaned from the theory of performativity proposed by Judith Butler. According to Butler, gender is not inherent, rather dependent on external cultural factors, so it is performed and hence changeable. Butler states that the “expressions of gender” are not based on any “gender identity”, rather the “identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler 1990 p. 25). There are a number of theoretical perspectives related to masculine identities in academia, all of which describe different types of performances of male gender like the perception and performance of masculine gender as hegemonic, hybrid, inclusive, queer, caring or toxic.

One of the foundational theories of masculinity is Raewyn W. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity. Connell analyzes the Western cultural model based on two power structures, that of men’s domination over women and hegemonic masculinity’s domination over “subordinated and marginalized masculinities” (Connell 2005, p. 77-81). The key characteristics of hegemonic masculinity are power, aggression, authority, physical prowess, competition and heterosexuality (Connell 1987, p. 186-187).

Connell’s theory is challenged by Demetrakis Demetriou’s concept of hybrid masculinity. Hybrid masculinity incorporates elements of “marginalized and subordinated masculinities” (Bridges, 2014, p.246). Demetriou’s notion of hybrid masculinity focused on the assimilation of gay culture into heterosexual male practices to produce “new, hybrid configurations of gender practice” that perpetuate the dominance of men over women (Demetriou, 2001, pp.350-351). Scholars have considered the impacts of hybrid masculinity in three ways. Some believe that it has no significance other than a localized variation; others believe that it is prevalent across cultures and has lessened inequality in men’s relations; a third school-of-thought asserts that hybrid masculinity causes changes in systems of power without challenging them (Bridges, 2014, pp. 247).

In another model of inclusive masculinity, Eric Anderson arranges masculinities horizontally rather than vertically to prove that contemporary masculinities mitigate inequalities and are more inclusive rather than exclusive (Bridges, 2014, p. 248). Another category of masculinity is queer masculinity defined as “ways of being masculine outside hetero-normative constructions of masculinity that disrupt, or have the potential to disrupt, traditional images of the hegemonic heterosexual masculine” (Robert Heasley, 2005, p.310). Heasley has proposed the category of “straight-queer men” to give linguistic and theoretical credence to the gay/ queer experiences of straight men (p.312). Heasley calls his attempt to create a space for queer masculinity a “queering of hegemonic hetero- masculinity” (Heasley, 2005, p.320). He has suggested a typology of five categories of queer- straight males (Heasley, 2005, p.315). Yet another framework to view masculinity is the concept of caring masculinity which is a “pro-equality masculinity” (Kluczynska, U., 2021 p. 11). It is based on the provision of care to one’s family, community and oneself and also maintaining close inter-personal relationships (Kluczynska, 2021 p10).

Another emerging term which has been in vogue for some time now is toxic masculinity. The term was coined in the 1980s and has been rapidly used since 2014 (Harrington 2020 p2). The term has been used in different contexts. Feminists have applied the term to homophobia, misogyny and violence by men (Harrington 2020 p5). In a research by Terry Kupers, the author maintains that “toxic masculinity involves the need to aggressively compete and dominate others and encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men” (Kupers 2005, 713-714).

The representation of masculine gender in Pakistani films is lesser study area of research. A greater number of scholarly works on gender in films is available for the South Asian or Indian cinema. There is a dearth of research on Pakistani film industry, often studied under South Asian films. So, it will be useful to understand the larger South Asian context of gender representation in films.

In a study by Gita Rajan on the representation of masculinities in South Asian cinema, the author analyzes three Indian films, finding shifts in representations of masculinity. The films portray society’s “chauvinism and homophobia” (Rajan 2006 p 1111), “cultural patriarchy” (Rajan 2006 p 1112) and “different kinds of heterosexual masculinities” in contrast to the poor depiction of homosexuality (Rajan 2006 1119). Rajan’s study is limited in its scope as it is only focused on Indian films. It would have been a portrayal of South Asia had the researcher conducted a comparative analysis of Indian, Pakistani, Bengali and other films.

Another researcher, Sangeeta Datta, studies the “process of gender representation in Indian cinema” specifically (Datta 2000 p.72). She analyzes Bollywood films of the eighties and nineties from a national and global perspective (Datta 2000 p. 75), asserting that the nationalist agenda behind the films is interlinked with the female body (p 73). Works by women filmmakers promoted “female subjectivity” and the “female gaze” (p73). Besides, the genre of female avenger films depicted women’s physical vulnerability and rape scenes, possibly predicated on “sado- masochistic pleasure” (p 75).

In the Pakistani context, Shahjehan Saleem Siddiqui’s work on gender representation in Pakistani film industry analyzes three Pakistani movies. Siddiqui finds that the balance of power between the sexes has changed. While gender stereotypes persist in these films, the identities of characters also signal a shift away from traditional views (Siddiqui 2014 p 44). Siddiqui finds that male gender is no longer hegemonic and female gender has its own voice while queer representation can become “possibly better” (Siddiqui 2014 p 52).

Another work by Zarbab Toor, Dr. Farah Kashif and Dr. Urooj Fatima Alvi examines gender contestation in Pakistani TV dramas using multimodal analysis based on representational, interpersonal and textual meanings (Toor, Kashif & Alvi, 2023, pp.159). They also included a questionnaire to test the impact of media representations on the minds of people. Most participants depicted a strong influence of media, considering the negative media images of women and real women as the same (Toor, Kashif & Alvi, 2023, p.175). The researchers affirm that these are contested images of women and challenge this depiction by terming it a “false reality” (Toor, Kashif & Alvi, 2023, p.176). In short, there is a lacuna in literature on masculine gender in Pakistani cinema. The present study aims to fill the lacuna in literature on masculine gender in Pakistani cinema specifically and the existence of various kinds of masculinities in Pakistani society generally.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The current paper will utilize the contemporary Western ideologies of masculinities along with a home-grown model of measuring masculinity ideologies. The Western masculine ideologies used are hegemonic, hybrid, inclusive, queer, caring and toxic masculinity. The Pakistani psychometric scale for measuring masculine ideologies is proposed by Sara Imtiaz and Anila Kamal.

According to this psychometric scale, 421 participants including 268 men and 173 women between 19-51 years were taken as sample (Imtiaz and Kamal, 2023, p.19) to identify prevailing ideologies related to masculinity present in contemporary Pakistani society. The item pool was generated by creating statements that reflected specific male ideologies of physical, mental and emotional strength, sexuality, competence, power and control, physical demeanour, roles and responsibilities, and male privilege (Imtiaz and Kamal, 2023, p. 25). Participants were asked to respond to the item bank statements on a five-point scale ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. The researchers have developed a 31-item scale comprising 13 items on male privilege and power, 10 items on traditional roles and responsibilities, 5 items on effeminacy and 3 items on restricted emotionality (Imtiaz and Kamal, 2023, pp.19-20). The researchers have mentioned some of the characteristics related to each of the four domains (pp. 19-20). The current study mentions those characteristics in tabular form for ease of understanding and analysis.

**Table 1: Pakistani masculine ideologies scale (Imtiaz and Kamal, 2023, pp. 19-20)**

Male Privilege and Power	Traditional Roles and Responsibilities	Effeminacy	Restricted Emotionality
Provision of dignified food serving Intensive financial investment Exercising influence/power on women Preserving family honor Authority in the domain of sexuality Authority in the domain of finances Unquestionable liberty	Men’s role as provider Men’s role as protector Frontline responsibility taker Pressure handler Executor of heavy work Executor of outdoor tasks	Distance from feminine outlooks and demeanour Avoiding feminine clothing Avoiding fashion Avoiding gossip/ backbiting Avoiding spending time on self- grooming	Abstinence from disclosing vulnerable emotions Avoiding public crying Avoiding mourning at the death of loved ones

The proposed model of analysis for the current paper is:-

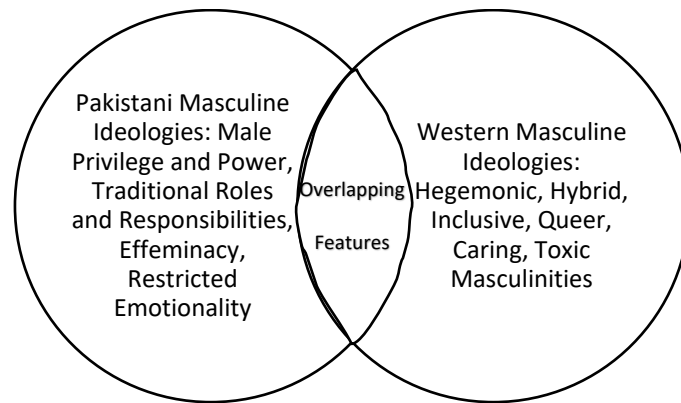


Figure 1: Proposed model of analysis/ Theoretical framework

#### 4. Zindagi Tamasha (Circle of Life) (2019/ 2023)

The Pakistani movie *Zindagi Tamasha* (ZT), winner at the 24<sup>th</sup> Busan International Film Festival, is directed by Sarmat Khoosat, written by Nirmal Bano and produced by Kanwal Khoosat. The 2019 film was originally set to be released on 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2022, but it was banned by the Pakistan censor board due to its controversial portrayal of sensitive issues and has just now been released on You tube in 2023.

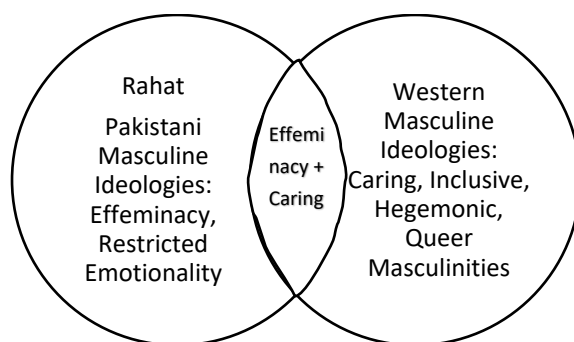
The protagonist Rahat Khawaja is a prominent, middle-class, elderly man of the neighbourhood where he is famous for reciting *Naats*, poems that praise the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Professionally, he is a real estate agent and property dealer. Rahat has three daughters all of whom are married. Only Sadaf lives nearby and visits her parents frequently. Rahat's wife is paralyzed, so Rahat does all household chores including looking taking care of his bed-ridden wife. He is depicted as the ideal old man with prestige, health, financial stability and well-settled children. His relationship with his sick wife is based on care, love and respect as is evident through their conversations and his acts of service. The film also depicts Sadaf's husband, Danish, a handsome young man who is the secondary male character in the film. Throughout the movie, he lends help to his wife and her parents on various occasions. Other prominent male characters include the neighbours, specially a shop-keeper, Usman. Besides, the film also portrays transgenders and gays.

The movie opens with Rahat reciting a melodious *Naat*. Then, the film shows Rahat buying food on his way to home where he has dinner with his wife and daughter, Sadaf. Throughout the movie, Rahat is portrayed as a dedicated husband and caring father, contrary to any overbearing or domineering stereotypical representation. Rahat is involved in a number of acts of service for his wife. He performs his home chores lightly and cheerfully. In various domestic scenes, he is shown performing different tasks like combing his wife's hair and cooking for the two of them. At the occasion of *Eid Milad*, the birth of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), believed to fall on the twelfth of the third lunar month, Rahat Khawaja recites *Naat* annually and cooks a dessert, *halwa*, for distributing amongst his neighbours. Before going outside on one occasion, Rahat takes his wife's opinion and shakes hands with her lovingly and endearingly. Concerned for her well-being, he reminds her that he has charged her cell phone should she need help of any kind. All these character traits depict characteristics of caring masculinity in Rahat. Rahat also has traits of inclusive masculinity as he associates with transgenders openly. He also gives regular financial support to poor transgenders living in his neighbourhood. This reflects his openness towards people having different sexualities.

The conflict in the movie is Rahat's ostracization by his neighbouring community due to his dance at a wedding. The viral video of his dance turned people including his neighbours, childhood friends and his daughter, against him as they cannot perceive of a man who recites *Naat* to be able to dance so evocatively or an elderly and fatherly gentleman behaving so vulgarly. Friends and acquaintances stop talking and associating with him for exhibiting feminine traits. Some men gossip behind his back about his association with transgenders, calling him a "rotten egg" (Khoosat Films, 2019). Rahat's character subverts traditional gender roles and male power and privilege as he is very caring and supportive for his wife. The irony is that people do not criticize him for doing house-hold chores as gendered stereotypes dictate women to be responsible for home tasks. But the same people condemn him for engaging in a performing arts activity out of fun and begin to consider him as effeminate and gay. Rahat does have highly restricted emotionality, one of the indicators of traditional Pakistani masculine ideology. He does not cry at his wife's death, nor does he depict sorrow at his boycott from community. He does

show outward signs of agitation, but these are limited to finger tapping, pondering, discussing with Usman the treatment he's receiving, being silent and avoiding people. There are no emotional outbursts except once when he becomes angry at a *Maulvi sahib*, cleric, who insists on Rahat to make a sincerely apologetic video for general public and also threatens Rahat with a false blasphemy charge at another occasion.

During his ostracization, posters on male reproductive health pop up anonymously outside his house, affirming the notion that society links sexuality and power with being a man. The hegemonic tendencies of the community are evident in their violence against the transgenders and implications about Rahat's sexuality when the latter visits transgenders for helping them in their time of need. Rahat is also mistaken for being gay by Usman. Thus, displaying the traits of singing and dancing signify effeminacy in him, making him a non-conformist to traditional gender roles and ideological stereotypes associated with being a Pakistani male. Usman takes him to a gathering of gay men who meet discreetly twice a month to express their sexual orientation without fear of social judgment. However, Rahat has no tolerance for homosexuality, becoming angry at being perceived as gay. He considers it a sin, calling Usman a follower of the nation of Prophet Lot (Khoosat Films, 2019). So, there's no trace of hybrid masculinity in his character. His homophobia and anger at the posters outside his home publicly implying decreased sexual health, are traits of hegemonic masculinity in his personality. Usman's perception of Rahat as gay adds a slight touch of queer masculinity also to his personality



**Figure 2: Dominant Pakistani and Western masculine ideologies in Rahat's character from *Zindagi Tamasha* (2019)**

Besides Rahat, Danish has the role of mediation between his wife and her parents. He also arranges a set-up for an apologetic video to help Rahat rectify his gauche diplomatically. He has an open-minded attitude unlike Sadaf who distances herself from her father. The attention and importance given to Danish reflects the privilege he is getting because he is the son-in-law, thus his character depicts male power and privilege. He pacifies his own mother after the viral video in defence of Sadaf and her parents, showing an open-minded and protective attitude. He goes shopping for household supplies after his mother-in-law's funeral, depicting men's execution of outdoors tasks. He also takes care of his in-laws like a helpful son. These traits depict the traditional gender roles and responsibilities expected of a male. His character can be said to depict these two categories of the Pakistani masculine ideology. He can also be classified as performing his masculinity in a caring way towards his family. However, there is insufficient screen time given to Danish to observe the shades of other Western masculine ideologies in his personality. The cleric who threatens Rahat is an example of a hegemonic male who asserts his superiority over another male by virtue of his heterosexuality and pseudo-religious facade which Rahat had exposed by giving details of his financial corruption. In short, the film *Zindagi Tamasha* (2019) portrays various forms of masculinity like caring masculinity, inclusive masculinity and hegemonic masculinity.

## 5. Joyland (2022)

Joyland is a Pakistani film written and directed by Saim Sadiq. The film has won awards at 2022 Cannes Film Festival. It was temporarily banned due to its "highly objectionable" content (Nicholson, 2023).

The protagonist is a young, unemployed, middle-class male, Haider who is the "younger, gentler son" of a "white-haired bully", Amaan (Nischolson, 2023). Saleem is Haider's older brother who is quite the "macho" (Nischolson, 2023). Throughout the movie, Haider's polite tone, low volume and courteous style are a hallmark of his decency and softness. He is a man who can take blame for a girl's no as he goes to meet his wife-to-be, Mumtaz, to assure her that there's no pressure on her for agreeing to an arrange marriage and that he would say no if she is afraid to speak her mind. He is portrayed as playing with his nieces and lulling them to sleep, cooking food with his sister-in-law, Nuchi, as he is home while Mumtaz is at her job. Nuchi relies on Haider's

help a lot in caring for the children and lending help in the kitchen. Due to his acts of service to his family and relationships with his nieces, he can be classified as depicting caring masculinity like Rahat Khawaja.

Haider also shows effeminacy like Rahat when he could not slaughter a goat despite his father's orders and Mumtaz took the lead in cutting off the head of the goat. He does not conform to the categories of male privilege and power and traditional gender roles just like Rahat Khawaja. He doesn't have restricted display of emotion as he breaks down and cries in front of his wife, instead of trying to go.

The conflict in the movie is that Haider, a married man, falls for the transgender woman and theatre dancer, Biba. Once he gets a job as Biba's background dancer, Haider's father decides that Mumtaz should start doing household chores along with Nuchi as her husband is now earning. Mumtaz, a fiercely independent and vivacious girl, feels bound and suffocated within the conventional gender norms dictating the domestic space. On the other hand, Haider starts giving more attention and time to Biba. When his wife needed him the most physically and emotionally during her pregnancy, Haider was unavailable. In his relation with Mumtaz, Haider is the cheating husband who is a hegemonic male with undue sexual liberty. In regards to his interaction with Biba, Haider depicts queer tendencies and is a straight queer man as Heasley has proposed.

Along with Haider, another prominent character is that of his father. The father's character is symbolic of hegemonic masculinity, enjoying male power and privilege as he is the leader of the household, making decisions for the family. He is afraid of going against social norms by getting re-married to a widow thus affirming that men want to preserve their image in the eyes of other men and society in general. Nicholson asserts that "suppression and restraint" are the dominant themes in the film and "every man... is terrified to become the target of gossip — a paranoia that sometimes seems to be only in their heads" (2023). Saleem's character also depicts masculine hegemony as he told his wife to leave her job after marriage, desired for a male child and kept cursing Mumtaz for taking her life and killing his brother's unborn male child (Joyland, 2022). He is also afraid of breaking social norms, fearful that the mourners would hear his wife's loud bickering. Besides, the background dancers having a lecherous obsession with Biba's sexuality are representative of toxic masculinity.

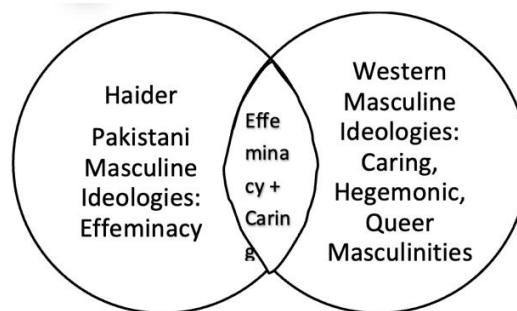


Figure 3: Dominant Pakistani and Western masculine ideologies in Haider's character from Joyland (2022)

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

In *Zindagi Tamasha*, hegemonic masculinity is overpowering as displayed by the attitude of the neighbours and the cleric, threatening to displace other forms of masculinity like caring masculinity and inclusive masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is depicted in the cleric, the neighbours and a small fraction is also exhibited in Rahat's personality due to his homophobia. Caring masculinity is predominantly present in Rahat's character and also present to some extent in Danish. Rahat's character also has traces of inclusive masculinity as he does his best to make the transgenders feel included by helping them and even relying on their help when he himself is ostracized. The reverse in the situation is depicted when the transgender helps Rahat to distribute the dessert. This signifies a change in people's perception of Rahat's status as a hegemonic male who subscribes to masculine power and prestige just because of his sex. For them, Rahat has performed his gender in an effeminate and queer way, thus losing his moral, sexual and social superiority.

In *Joyland*, the dominant mode of masculinity in the protagonist is caring and queer masculinity along with a trace of hegemonic masculinity. Other masculinities depicted in Saleem and his father's character are also hegemonic, whereas the men mocking Biba can be classified under toxic masculinity. There is similarity between Rahat and Haider and also a similarity between the prevalence of culture more than religion. The comparative study of both films has highlighted that current trends in Pakistani society and cinema are under a shift with

more focus on inclusive, caring and queer masculinities. These are the predominantly emerging masculinities in the otherwise hegemonically masculine and patriarchal Pakistani culture.

## 7. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

The present research is limited to the analysis of two films with a focus on only the masculine gender. Future studies can broaden the corpus and incorporate the analyses of more than one gender. Besides, the strength of the suggested framework is that it creates a balance and middle ground between local and global perceptions of masculinity. So, it can also be used in literary studies, film studies and other inter-disciplinary fields for understanding contemporary Pakistani masculinities in a better and more holistic way.

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