

## **Is It Just a Joke? A Qualitative Exploration of Misogyny, Body Shaming and Sexism in Punjabi Stage Dramas**

**Dr. Muhammad Rizwan Safdar<sup>1</sup>, Hira Siddique<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Punjabi stage dramas have been facing a negative reputation in recent years due to the obscenity of content presented in them, hence raising concerns about how they are misrepresenting Punjab's culture. The humor in these dramas flourishes primarily through the humiliation of the women and objectification of their bodies. The present study aims to analyze how the Punjabi stage dramas objectify women and reinforce the negative gender stereotypes through humor. In order to investigate potential responses to the research question, this study employed a qualitative methodology and an inductive content analysis research technique. Upon closely observing and identifying recurring motifs in stage drama episodes, classifications were established and further analyzed to generate themes. The results of the study uncovered some alarming patterns in Punjabi stage dramas where the female body was sexualized and objectified through the use of different metaphors and jokes. The male characters were noticed mocking the female characters on their physique and especially their breast size, hence perpetuating a repulsive environment of misogyny and sexism. The study also discovered another side of masculinity where subordinate masculine roles were sexually harassed by

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. Email: [drizwansafdar.iscs@pu.edu.pk](mailto:drizwansafdar.iscs@pu.edu.pk)

<sup>2</sup> Lecturer Sociology at Government Fatima Jinnah College, Lahore, Pakistan. Email: [hiraazhar8700@gmail.com](mailto:hiraazhar8700@gmail.com)

the hegemonic masculine male characters. The study findings suggest an urgent need for the rectification of these problems by portraying a rather positive and practical image of the female gender that represents the cultural values of Punjab and one where their bodies are not objectified.

**Keywords:** *Women, Objectification, Gender, Punjabi Dramas, Humor.*

## **Introduction**

In the 21st century, media in its different forms holds the power to create social change through its capability to create not only a public opinion but also mold a previously developed belief into a new and desired notion (Mishra, 2012). Women of the present era have been hitting so many milestones and are serving as a source of inspiration for many people; however, the media world is not ready to accept and share this fact to the world (Purnima, 2010). Unfortunately, media portrayal of women still revolves around sexually objectifying them to incite the audience; creating an opinion among people to see women as perfect in their femininity but not capable enough to achieve positions (Flynn et al., 2016; Ali, 2018).

In the present era, television, internet, magazine, and other forms of media have been seen presenting women as just a thing to allure men (Akalonu & Ha, 2024). Among all this chaos, the most disturbing fact is that the growing trend of standup comedy, comedy skits, or infotainment programs is contributing prominently to this grim situation of sexualizing women (Odukoya, 2017). Comedy content creators have a massive following on social media and have the power to shape audience's attitude and belief through their social media blogs, posts, and tweets, even if it promote female objectification (Freberg et al., 2011) but unfortunately; comedy programs are filled with demeaning and humiliating jokes based on racist, casteist, and sexist humor, and are considered offensive by a lot of people (Kumar et al., 2023).

There are multiple domains in media in which humor has shown its dominant presence such as infotainment programs, cartoons, comic series, sitcoms, talk shows, or opinion oriented programs (Chovanec & Ermida, 2017). In the context of Pakistan and particularly Punjab, the Punjabi stage dramas are a popular source of comedy and entertainment which are usually presented in a theater setting (Saleem, 2022). A prominent characteristic of Punjabi stage drama is an erotic dance performance by female performers in between different scenes which ultimately becomes a challenge for channels to stream these stage dramas on national television considering the ethical grounds (Pamment, 2017).

People in Punjab and worldwide have their different reasons to love or hate the stage dramas- some love them for their comedy, some love them for the dance performances and erotic objectification of women; some also hate these dramas for their vulgar and obscene content and for some, it is an escape from their lives (Huda & Ali, 2015). In general, the media has objectified women to the point where she is always under the sword of sexual harassment in real life (Asghar & Shereen, 2021). These stage dramas have created a sexualized facade of women by promoting sexual objectification in multiple ways including laughing by creating ambiguities about sexuality, demanding favors sexually from female characters, joking on their body parts, touching them inappropriately, and many more (Montemurro, 2003).

Moreover, there is also a general pattern noticed on how the camera captures the female body in these stage dramas. First of all, whenever the female character comes on screen the actual plot of the drama is slowed down and all the focus of the camera moves toward the body of the performer.. Secondly, the cameraman takes closed up shots of female bodies while zooming in to specific parts of her. The purpose is to satisfy the ‘male gaze’.

One astonishing fact is that this pattern also applied to those female characters who were portrayed as *Mahi Munda* or TomBoy (Mulvey, 2013).

The point of concern is that this sexual objectification of women not only allures the male gaze but also creates stigmas for women in their actual lives. It is important to see how the theater and stage dramas are shaping the opinions of people in society. To the researcher's best knowledge, there is not much research available on the female objectification portrayed in Punjabi Stage Dramas. So the present study focuses on discussing how Punjabi stage dramas promote sexual objectification of women and how these trends promote negative stereotypes in society about women. The present research aims to contribute to the literature by paving way for further research (Imam et al., 2023).

### **Literature Review**

Researchers from different areas of the world have critically analyzed humor in trying to find the underlying beliefs and ideologies which promote present day stereotypes (Billig, 2005). According to a study, gendered humor serves the purpose of maintaining social order in society by reaffirming the socio-cultural boundaries between masculinity and femininity and disapproving of any other kind of gendered identities by using humor as a harmless tool (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Due to this representation of humor as benign, dark humor's major target in present time is sexuality and gender, as people find no other safe way to degrade others through their inexcusable gendered remarks except when using humor as defense. Similar kind of research was conducted in Egypt where the online sexist jokes were analyzed through content analysis and the results yielded four categories of the sexist jokes i-e jokes based on language female used, by sexualizing their bodies, trolling them in their public private sphere, and creating insecurities

through questioning overall body image (Nayef & El-Nashar, 2014). When it comes to language, there is a thing as masculine or feminine language. Researchers, with the help of General Theory of Verbal Humor, have inquired into the online linguistic jokes used by society members and the results explained how these jokes serve the purpose of reaffirming the already created stereotypes in society about women and men in the context of intellect. By representing women as block-heads and dumb, these jokes promote injustice, denied rights, and oppression for females in the social setups (Ruch et al., 1993).

Talking about the big screen and social media, Punjabi movies have been reported to be using toxic comedy by promoting hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy in their jokes. For instance, a study conducted in Indian Punjab documented the lived experiences of Punjabi people as described by Punjabi films whose typical script contain a *Punjabi Jutt Hero* whose honor is dependent directly on the women of his family and is seen protecting this honor by imposing patriarchal rules (Chanda & Bansal, 2020). Not only Punjabi movies, Punjabi songs are also seen promoting casteism and sexism. Punjabi dances objectify women by representing the female dancers as whores whose real life identity eventually becomes the same. However, on a positive side, the effect of globalization can be seen on digital media as female rappers has made their place in society by challenging all masculine roles and putting a question mark on femininity by adapting to male centered activities such as smoking and drinking (Roy, 2020).

A thorough study of *The Bhand* about Punjabi stage dramas gave a detailed view about the female objectification in stage dramas. The use of seductive and sparkling expressions and dance moves by female performers in these dramas have the sole objective of attracting the ‘male gaze’ which

consequently strengthen the long existing power patterns in society and pave the way for patriarchy to continue (Pamment, 2019; Asghar & Shereen, 2021). Another research on the live *Mujra dances* in Pakistani stage dramas reported that the script and choreography of these alluring Mujra dances were mostly written and directed by male producers who basically sexually objectified the bodies of female performers to serve the toxic concept of masculinity (Syeda, 2015).

After thorough review of national and international literature available on stage dramas of Punjab, to researcher's best knowledge, very fragmented literature could be attained. There is some research that discusses the television infotainment and comedy programs, almost no research has been done on how female gender is objectified in Punjabi stage dramas and how they reinforce negative stereotypes in a typical Punjabi society. The present research aims to bridge above mentioned gaps.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Design:**

Research design is like a map which guides the whole process of conducting research, providing guidance at every step (Akhtar, 2016). The techniques of doing research are different for qualitative and quantitative research. For instance, the process from planning and designing to actually conducting research is way more flexible in case of qualitative research than quantitative research for which the rules are rather rigid (Draper, 2004). The present study was a qualitative research in design and used Inductive Content Analysis (ICA) approach to carry out the present research. Content analysis is an approach to conducting research that systematically observes available content and explains the phenomenon under study in a detailed way (Krippendorff, 1980; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Sandelowski, 1995).

### **Study Population:**

Study population in a subset out of a larger population which is selected in a particular research for data collection and represents the whole population under study; and results from which are then generalized on the whole population (Byrne, 2001). The study population for the present research consisted of all Punjabi stage dramas on any social media platform, published not more than 5 years ago so as to get up-to-date information on how the present day stage dramas objectify women through their humor.

### **Sample and Data Collection:**

There is no predetermined sample size in qualitative research as it depends on the depth of research questions. In other words, sample size in qualitative research involves collecting data till the point of saturation- when no more new information is coming out of data collection procedure (Marshall, 1996). The present study made use of purposive sampling strategy to select those stage dramas that were published not more than 5 years ago, have a length of maximum 60 minutes, and have at least 100,000 views on youtube. The present study analyzed content from 10 episodes after which the patterns and jokes were repetitive, hence the point of saturation.

### **Data Analysis:**

Data analysis procedure has the fundamental purpose of explaining the phenomenon under study in an explained way in the light of the data collected (Krippendorff, 2004). When it comes to Inductive content analysis, the data is available in the form of words, texts, emotions, expressions, photographs, and videos and so the researcher takes every little detail and cultural context into consideration while doing the data analysis procedure (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The present study used inductive content analysis because the nature of research was exploratory- very little literature was available on the topic under

study. After observing the content from the selected sample, themes were generated from the categories which were directly created from the content. The themes were used to later observe the patterns used by Punjabi stage dramas to impose misogyny, target female sexuality, and reinforce masculine and feminine stereotypes in society.

### Study Findings

The demographic information of the study sample is presented in table 4.1. The study sample consisted of 10 Punjabi stage dramas (till reaching the point of saturation) uploaded by different channels on Youtube. All of the selected stage dramas were from last five year and had an average length of 83 minutes. On average, the watch count for each episode was more than one million and each episode consisted of 7-8 male characters and 4-5 female characters. Every drama covered a different storyline or plot but the general patterns of gender targeting were present in each drama.

The thematic analysis of the study sample yielded three categories that represented gender-biased stereotypical behaviors expressed by the characters.

The present study gave out the following themes:

- Body Bashing
- ‘Her’ Critique
- Masculinity: The Shadow Self

**Table 4.1: Demographic Information of Punjabi Stage Dramas**

Serial No.	Name of the stage drama in English	Year of release	Duration	Views
1	The whistle will blow	2018	1 hour 28 minutes	2.2 million
2	Lazy lovers	2019	1 hour 20 minutes	1.7 million



3	She plays with the heart	2020	1 hour 44 minutes	1.2 million
4	Look at the sparrow	2021	1 hour 26 minutes	1.3 million
5	Wedding of my buddy	2021	1 hour 18 minutes	1.3 million
6	Lovers gone crazy	2022	1 hour 20 minutes	0.4 million
7	Agent <i>Takka sayin</i>	2022	1 hour 21 minutes	1.02 million
8	Shy eyes	2023	1 hour 20 minutes	0.12 million
9	Here they come again	2023	1 hour 8 minutes	0.49 million
10	Taste the grapes	2023	1 hour 9 minutes	0.14 million

Table 4.2 represents the major themes and sub-themes taken out of the study sample using inductive content analysis.

**Table 4.2:** Themes and sub-themes yielded from the study sample

Themes	Categories	Subcategories
Gendered concepts in Punjabi stage dramas	Body Bashing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Humiliating face/facial features</li> <li>2. Use of abusive phrases/sentences</li> <li>3. Mockery of fat/slim person</li> <li>4. Ridiculing on height</li> </ol>
	‘Her’ Critique	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Women objectification</li> <li>2. Use of abusive words regarding women</li> <li>3. Woman as a baby machine</li> </ol>

Masculinity: The shadow self	1. Sexual harassment faced by men with subordinate masculinity 2. Gay stereotypes
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## **Body Bashing:**

### **Humiliating face/facial features**

Humiliating the characters on their facial features was one of the most prominent features of humor used in Punjabi stage dramas. Previous literature has also confirmed the use of derogatory remarks by people especially in Punjab to humiliate people to make fun (Burmeister, 2015; Khan & Hussain, 2020).

Likewise, in this study following scoffing analogies were used for mocking the face by using sentences such as “His face is made just like a dog hit a wall” and “Let me tell you about his face, it resembles the leftover soap after everyone has showered and it is finished.” Using references from equipment/machines were also recorded such as “When the lemon-squeezing machine was invented, they took inspiration from his face”.

Analysis of the present research also observed comparing the face of the character with animals, for instance, “His face makes me think of the beak of a hawk.” Another interesting fact observed was that the target was seen normalizing this humiliation in such a way that he was recorded narrating his mockery in the following way: The man placed the iron in front of me with my face facing the flat side of the iron and then said... “Here! Have a look at your face” followed by a prominent laughter sound.

Not just the faces as a whole, the facial features were also targeted in the script of Punjabi stage dramas. To give an idea, “If a tire ever passed on someone’s nose, it will look exactly like his’ (short and pugged)”.

### **Use of abusive phrases/sentences**

The present study recorded excessive and repetitive usage of abusive phrases such as *Pisti Kutti* (Dwarf bitch), *Such a rat!*, *Haram-zada* (Illegal child), *Salaya* (often used for describing an ignorant and ill-mannered person), and *Dried up mice*, which were so normalized that no character or any member from the audience showed any noticeable response to this kind of humiliations as observed by the researcher.

### **Mockery of fat/slim person**

As evident from previous literature, dark humor has found its foundation in the insult of people's weight, height, body parts, and appearance (Burmeister, 2015; Khan & Ali, 2016). For instance, in the present research, the trend of ridiculing the actor for being slim or fat was observed prominently. The slim characters were ridiculed as "Once he grabbed a cup of tea and came out of a coma after 6 days" and in a relevant scene, the following sentences were used "The policeman dared to hit me with a shoe and then that moron kept searching for me for 40 minutes straight. I wish he had checked the palm of the shoe sooner!"

On the contrary, a chubby person was humiliated by using sentences such as "Look at him! He made his parents use all the reproductive material on him that's why he is their only child" and phrases such as "People! Someone's bull unshackled!" were used.

Also, a rather disturbing trend observed was that female body parts were compared to different fruits such as Melons, Lemons, and Watermelons to make the audience laugh.

### **Ridiculing on height**

Females particularly were called out with different names based on their height and muscular bodies such as *Mard Jeya* (such a masculine), John

Cena (a wrestler), Undertaker (a famous wrestler), and *Sanda Jeya* (such a bull). Also, the female character of above-average height was mocked by passing remarks such as “God forbids! Such tall girl. She will straight away produce a calf/heifer.”

### **‘Her’ Critique:**

#### **Women Objectification**

The present research reported sexual jokes to be making up the major portion of Punjabi stage dramas’ scripts. Females were humiliated by inserting power on them by the male characters and the male characters would behave as if they owned the female characters. For instance, in one of the scenes from a drama, misogynistic sentences were delivered by a male character in the following way:

“If I ever pay two-three visits to his house, his wife will have abundant babies”.

Another scene described the patriarchal remarks in the following way:

Male-1: You have been married for seven years now but you were unable to conceive a child. Thankfully now you will be a father!

Male-2: Really! How?

Male-1: Since you are not home now (heavy laughter)

The female characters were portrayed as whores who would allure men into spending their money on them by providing sexual services to men. For instance, one character represented it as “Why do you think I hired a hot girl like you? So my business could flourish. If you are unable to seduce guests into cutting loose some money, of what worth are you?” In another scene, it was represented as:

(he female receptionist comes back from escorting the guest to his room) and the owner of the hotel says, “So tell me! How much of the earnings did you secure?....(by giving sexual services)

The results also represented the belief that men have the right to stare at a woman's body and objectify her as narrated in one of the scenes:

F: Teacher Teacher! I want to become Noor Jahan (a Pakistani singer)  
While staring at her, the male character says: "You deserve to become Sunny Leone (former pornstar). Shouldn't I make you like her?" Heavy laughter!

### **Abusive Words Regarding Women**

One prominent theme that emerged from these dramas was the use of abusive words about women. Words like *Anni deya* (A blind woman's son), *Chaval di bachi* (A stupid woman's daughter), and *khoti da bacha* (Mare's child) were recorded as being used excessively by the male characters.

### **Woman as a baby machine**

The idea that women are born to serve the purpose of creating children and helping a man carry on his name was seen as deeply rooted in the ideology of Punjabi people as female was taunted on her inability to give birth which was considered her only purpose in life. As described:

"I selected you for my son by looking at your family's fertility. Your mother produced so many children; your brother has children as well; why are you unable to produce a child? You are just getting taller and taller day by day. Shall I ask your father to produce kids for my son? *Khoti di bachi!* (Daughter of Mare)"

In another scene from the same drama, a third person is berating father and son on their inability to make a woman pregnant as described:

"Millions of curses on you, the father and son both. You both couldn't make her produce one baby! What benefit is it to have two males in a house?"

## **Masculinity: The Shadow Self**

### **Sexual harassment faced by men with subordinate masculinity**

As confirmed by the previous literature as well, the present study also observed the trend of a hegemonic masculine male exploiting a relatively subordinate masculine male considering it his right in Punjabi stage dramas. As observed in one of the scenes (Scene: The strong-looking/alpha male says to the subordinate masculine):

“Let me have you in my blanket, my three more brothers will accompany you” and “I will create cute little babies from you.”

In another relevant scenario, the dominant masculine male is seen ridiculing the other by making sexual jokes, and audience laughter at such jokes represents an internalization of these trends as normal as represented in one of the scenes where the former is seen staring at the latter inappropriately while saying to a third actor:

Male-1: Whenever I visit his house, I increase the volume on the speaker

Male-2: Why so?

Male-1: So nobody can hear his screams outside the room (sexual exploitation)

### **Gay Stereotyping**

In Pakistan, the concept of masculinity is taken very intensely and seriously. But there is a certain ethnicity (Pathan), the men of which are believed to be interested more in men rather than women. While representing this trend, a Pathan character is observed saying a similar thing:

“If this woman possesses so much beauty, how handsome must be the brother!”

## **Discussion**

The present study focused on understanding the role of humor used in Punjabi stage dramas in objectifying women and promoting stereotypes in society. The study findings gave rise to three themes explaining the above mentioned objectives i.e. body bashing of females, sexually objectifying women, and targeting different types of masculinities. Over the period of time, humor has been serving the purpose of delivering opinions of people in a satirical way which are considered rather questionable and immoral if delivered in a serious tone as described by historical and contemporary research on humor (Fletcher, 1987; Boler, 2006; LeBoeuf, 2007; Meikle, 2008; Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011). Humor, particularly in Punjab, is majorly a responsibility of Punjabi stage dramas which were considered a very decent and family friendly show before the 21st century but have turned into these dangerous tools thriving on humiliation and promoting negative stereotypes in society (Bilal, 2018). As a result of the content analysis of Punjabi stage dramas, focusing particularly on the targeting of women through this humor, the present study found body bashing to be a major theme of these dramas.

Just like the present study, the findings of a related study conducted on Pakistani infotainment show *khabardar* exposed similar culture of humiliation where an actor was trolled for his dull complexion and unfit body by comparing him with different chronically ill characters and laughing on them (Bashir et al., 2022). This trend of humiliation and trolling may cause the audience to laugh or the people in general to feel amused by the situation but it also directly attacks the self-esteem of the target and leads him to perceive himself as a worthless human (Khan & Ali, 2016). Moreover, the constant events of negative self-perception leads an entire change of personality of that person with replacement of positive characters with negatives, beauty with

flaws, and good with bad. A constant exposure to exaggerating humor makes the target individual and people to make a negative image of that person which stays for life (Steele, 2012; Adler-Nissen & Tsinovoi, 2019; Brassett et al., 2021; Van Rythoven, 2022).

Present study indicates that Punjabi stage dramas that were once considered family-friendly dramas have transformed into episodes with sexually charging content made particularly for the entertainment of Punjabi masculine men. Such similar transition has also been reported in the standup comedy programs and live shows where the adult jokes have replaced decent jokes (Shanzeh, 2021). Moreover, one disturbing fact observed was the trend of utilizing one's own sexually traumatic experiences for creating jokes and producing apparently hot comedy content (Balkin, 2020). The frequent usage of adult terms and profane language in comedy shows has become very frequent and using words that cannot be described here on ethical grounds has destroyed the moral boundaries in media which were once an important aspect of media streaming (Shanzeh, 2021).

The results of present research also exposed another side of masculinity which is not very much talked about. The relatively ugly side of being a hegemonic masculine male is holding the power to exploit a subordinate masculine through sexual jokes and harassing behaviors. A similar research done about this behavior in organization reported that hegemonic masculinity represents itself in organizations by uncomfortable physical pranks, using of masculine sexual side as a joke, ridicule of homosexual male by parodies, and use of violence along with jokes (Plester, 2015). The subordinate employees were intimidated to laugh on these jokes to save their jobs.

Expressing a sense of coldness and displeasure would lead to expulsion from job permanently (Tyler & Cohen, 2008). The trend of joking sexually and



then covering it up ‘just joking’ flourishes a toxic culture of hegemonic masculinity and its power to exploit anyone who does not fall into this category (Collinson & Collinson, 1996). The gendered humor plays a significant role in perpetuating the social culture of giving power to hegemonic male. The fear of shame, disrespect and ridicule from members of society attached to being a subordinate masculine causes the target men to stay silent and bear the aggressive jokes. The research also found that males were afraid of being laughed at in contrast to women who were afraid of rape and harassment (Kimmel, 2010). Hence, the abundance of humor on gay, lesbian, effeminate men etc. validates the belief that jokes have become a way to maintain and socially construct a world made for hegemonic alpha males and rejection of non-hegemonic identities through the use of humor (Abedinifard, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

In the light of the findings of the current study, it can be concluded that the humor in Punjabi stage dramas is deep-rooted in misogyny, body shaming, women objectification and male chauvinism. This kind of expression of humor in stage dramas normalizes prejudice against women, upholds inequality, and strengthens misconceptions about already marginalized segment of society. The normalization of prejudice and body shaming in stage dramas can foster a culture in which gender-based harassment, discrimination and sexism are accepted as humorous or normal. Keeping in view the study findings, it is critical to confront and challenge humor that reinforces bigotry and misogyny in order to promote an inclusive culture.

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