

**Moral Duality in Pakistani Middle-Class Family Portrayals: A Critical Analysis of *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum***

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**Abstract**

This study investigates the moral dichotomy within Pakistani middle-class families through a thematic analysis of the television drama *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum*. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Social Constructionism, the research examines how the drama constructs, negotiates, and reinforces societal definitions of good and bad through its portrayal of character behavior, family hierarchies, and gendered expectations. The analysis reveals that the narrative glorifies economically successful yet ethically compromised characters, reflecting a cultural tendency to equate morality with social conformity and material achievement. Moreover, the drama exposes how patriarchal and class-based values shape notions of virtue, success, and respectability within domestic and social spheres. The findings suggest that *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* functions not merely as entertainment but as a cultural artifact that both mirrors and molds contemporary Pakistani perceptions of morality, success, and gender roles.

**Keywords:** Duality, Morality, Social Constructionism, Gender Roles, Class-Based Values

**Introduction**

Pakistani television dramas have long served as a reflective canvas for societal values, familial structures, moral and cultural expectations (Batool et al. 2023). Among recent productions, *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* (2024) stands out as one of the highest-rated Pakistani television series from 2021 to 2024 (Siasat, 2024), offering an exploration of middle-class morality. The drama is a compelling portrayal of the negotiations between virtue and vice within the boundaries of social convention and family obligation. It presents a layered depiction of middle-class existence, where economic anxieties, gendered expectations, and emotional complexities intersect to shape personal and collective identities (Nicol 2021). At the narrative's center are two brothers—Adeel, the responsible and conventionally successful elder son, and Mustafa, the carefree younger sibling often branded as a failure—and Sharjeena, a strong, self-aware woman reclaiming her worth after emotional betrayal. Adeel embodies societal ideals of masculinity and achievement, while Mustafa's unemployment and nonchalance render him a source of disappointment. Yet, as the story unfolds, Mustafa's emotional depth and quiet resilience challenge these moral binaries, questioning what truly constitutes virtue, success, or respectability in a middle-class household. Sharjeena's arc broadens the moral discourse further. A bibliophile and academic achiever, she defies stereotypes of the passive or dependent woman. Her journey from heartbreak to self-realization exposes the psychological and social burdens women bear in patriarchal family systems, where worth is often measured by lineage, particularly the presence of a male heir. Her resilience becomes both a critique and redefinition of the moral

expectations imposed on women within Pakistani culture. This study employs a critical thematic analysis to examine how *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* subverts traditional moral archetypes and interrogates the rigid value systems embedded within Pakistani middle-class families. By unpacking its representations of gender, hierarchy, and emotional labor, the research reveals how the drama blurs the lines between right and wrong, strength and vulnerability, and success and failure. In doing so, it positions *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* as a vital cultural text that reflects and critiques the evolving yet conflicted ethos of contemporary Pakistani society.

### **Problem Statement**

In Pakistani television narratives, morality is frequently depicted through rigid binaries characters are idealized or condemned based on their adherence to social norms, class expectations, and financial independence. *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* embodies this moral framework within a middle-class family setting, where virtue and success are often defined less by ethical conduct than by social performance and economic contribution. This raises a critical question: How does Pakistani popular media, through its portrayal of middle-class family structures, reinforce or challenge prevailing notions of morality, gender roles, and success? Despite the centrality of these themes in popular culture, there remains a scholarly gap in examining how such dramas condition audiences to internalize selective morality and perpetuate patriarchal ideals. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* both reflects and shapes the socio-cultural values and moral consciousness of contemporary Pakistani society.

This study aims:

- To explore how moral binaries (good vs. bad) are represented in the drama *Kabhi Mein Kabhi Tum* within the context of Pakistani middle-class family dynamics.
- To examine how gender roles and expectations influence the perception of morality and character value in middle-class households.
- To investigate the role of economic success, conformity, and emotional expression in constructing moral identities in the narrative.

By examining these contradictions, the research highlights how the drama subverts traditional archetypes, exposing the fluidity of morality within a society constrained by rigid social and familial expectations. It underscores how characters oscillate between virtue and vice, not as moral absolutes but as responses to social pressures, emotional needs, and economic realities. In doing so, *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* challenges the conventional moral frameworks that often define Pakistani middle-class identity. Ultimately, the drama functions as a reflective mirror of middle-class values—where virtue and flaw coexist, often blurred by circumstance and survival. Its characters embody the moral tensions of an evolving society that struggles to reconcile modern aspirations with traditional codes of respectability. Through its layered storytelling and psychological depth, *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* emerges as a compelling socio-cultural text, offering critical insight into the contradictions that shape morality, gender, and selfhood in contemporary Pakistan.

### **Literature Review**

Television has long served as one of the most accessible and influential mediums globally, shaping cultural norms and public consciousness across generations. Heiner (2018) highlights that television remains the oldest and most far-reaching form of mass communication, accessible to a wide demographic regardless of socioeconomic background. In Pakistan, the television drama industry occupies a central role in shaping societal attitudes, with millions tuning in regularly to follow narratives that often mirror their own lives. As noted by Mubarak (2015), Pakistani dramas have evolved into powerful tools for socio-cultural commentary, frequently addressing complex themes

such as gender inequality, domestic violence, and class-based struggles. Despite the inclusion of such critical issues, many of these dramas default to traditional family-centric plots, reinforcing established hierarchies and normative moral expectations (Liu, 2024). The popularity and emotional engagement these dramas generate allow them not only to reflect society but also to subtly dictate the boundaries of acceptable moral behavior, particularly within middle-class households (Kobalava, 2017). This performative reinforcement of morality is especially evident in dramas that present rigid binaries of good and bad, often determined by economic status, family roles, and gender norms rather than ethical conduct. According to Sultan (2020), television content in Pakistan tends to portray virtue and vice in stereotypical formats, where financially successful male characters are exalted regardless of their moral failings, while women are celebrated for their endurance and emotional suppression rather than agency or professional identity. This reinforces patriarchal standards and creates a framework where success is tied to material achievement rather than personal integrity. As Hall (1997) explains through cultural studies, media plays a central role in encoding ideologies and value systems that are then interpreted and internalized by audiences, making television dramas a vital site for examining the social construction of morality. Building on Hall's (1997) encoding/decoding model, audiences do not passively absorb meanings; rather, they interpret them through personal and cultural frameworks. However, when media repeatedly portrays certain moral codes, these representations become naturalized and accepted as "common sense" (Fiske, 2011). In Pakistani dramas, such naturalization reveals in the valorization of the obedient son, the sacrificial mother, and the compliant daughter-in-law — archetypes that reinforce middle-class ideals of respectability and control (Shah, 2022). *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* situates itself within this moral landscape yet destabilizes it by depicting flawed, emotionally complex characters who challenge societal definitions of success and virtue. Scholars like Qureshi (2019) and Abbas (2021) have observed that Pakistani middle-class narratives frequently intertwine moral judgment with social mobility, reflecting how class consciousness shapes moral hierarchies. The middle class, as a site of aspiration and anxiety, often becomes a battleground for competing notions of modernity and tradition (Khan, 2020). Within such narratives, morality operates as both a form of social discipline and a mechanism for maintaining patriarchal order (Zafar, 2018). Hence, dramas like *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* serve as cultural texts that reveal how morality is negotiated through emotional labor, gendered responsibility, and familial reputation. Furthermore, women's portrayals in these dramas often oscillate between empowerment and restraint. As Saeed (2019) notes, female protagonists are frequently positioned as moral compasses of the household but rarely granted autonomy to redefine morality on their own terms. Even when women pursue education or independence, their choices are often validated only when aligned with familial or social expectations (Hassan & Jamil, 2021). *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* extends this discussion by presenting Sharjeena as an educated, emotionally resilient woman whose self-worth is tested against the very moral codes she challenges. In essence, existing literature highlights a persistent tension within Pakistani television dramas: while they provide visibility to evolving gender roles and class struggles, they continue to reproduce moral dualities rooted in patriarchy and middle-class respectability. This study, therefore, positions *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* as a significant case through which to explore how morality, gender, and class are constructed, contested, and communicated in contemporary Pakistani media culture.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the theoretical lens of **Social Constructionism**, a perspective that posits that reality is not objective or static but continually constructed through cultural, linguistic, and social interactions (Andrews, 2012). Within media and communication studies, Social Constructionism emphasizes how narratives, symbols, and representations in media shape societal understandings of morality, gender, and identity (Burr, 2015). According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), knowledge

and meaning are produced through social interaction, institutionalized through repetition, and eventually taken as objective truths. In this context, television dramas act as key cultural agents that circulate and legitimize particular moral worldviews. In *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum*, morality is not portrayed as a binary of absolute good or evil. Instead, the drama reflects how cultural constructs such as the “good son,” the “respectable woman,” or the “failed family member” are fluid and negotiated within the sociocultural fabric of the Pakistani middle class. The characters’ actions are judged not by universal ethical standards but by their conformity to, or deviation from, societal expectations. This aligns with Burr’s (2015) argument that meaning is socially negotiated rather than inherent; what is deemed moral or immoral depends on the interpretive frameworks sustained by a community. Likewise, Social Constructionism intersects with **Cultural Studies** (Hall, 1997) in recognizing media as an arena where dominant ideologies are both reproduced and contested. By decoding the symbolic representations in *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum*, this study explores how the drama challenges and reconfigures the cultural scripts surrounding masculinity, femininity, and family honor. The characters’ moral choices and emotional struggles expose the tensions between internal conscience and external validation—between the desire for individual authenticity and the compulsion to perform social respectability. This theoretical approach allows for a deeper reading of the drama’s ideological underpinnings. By examining how meanings of “virtue,” “failure,” and “respect” are socially constructed within the narrative, the research highlights television’s role as a site of both conformity and resistance. In line with Fairclough’s (2003) perspective on discourse and power, *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* operates as a discursive text that both sustains and critiques the socio-moral order of Pakistan’s middle class. Ultimately, applying Social Constructionism to this analysis illuminates how *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* does more than tell a family story—it participates in the ongoing cultural dialogue about morality, class, and gender. It portrays a moral universe where meaning is fluid, where social performance often overrides ethical integrity, and where television becomes a potent site for constructing collective understandings of virtue and vice in contemporary Pakistani society.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a **thematic analysis** of the Pakistani television drama *Kabhi Mein Kabhi Tum*. Thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning—or “themes”—within qualitative data. It allows for an in-depth exploration of how narratives, characters, and dialogues construct particular social realities. In this context, the study analyzes how the drama presents a layered tapestry of middle-class morality, where notions of good and bad are constantly negotiated through economic status, gender roles, parental bias, and emotional behavior. The analysis focuses on recurring motifs, symbolic representations, and dialogues that reveal the moral and cultural ideologies embedded in the narrative. Themes such as the “**mirage of success**,” “**symbolic female agency**,” “**moral blindness in parenting**,” and “**emotional versus material worth**” are examined to understand how *Kabhi Mein Kabhi Tum* communicates shifting moral paradigms within Pakistani middle-class society. These themes collectively paint a vivid portrait of how morality in media is shaped less by ethical virtue and more by visibility, utility, and conformity to social expectations. In doing so, the drama functions not merely as entertainment but as a form of **cultural critique**, inviting viewers to reconsider the values they reward, the archetypes they uphold, and the emotional truths they overlook (Lull, 1995). The thematic approach allows the research to decode symbolic meanings within the narrative structure, linking them to broader social ideologies reflected in Pakistani television culture.

### **The Mirage of Success**

One of the most prominent themes in *Kabhi Mein Kabhi Tum* is the representation of success as a sudden windfall rather than a gradual process rooted in perseverance or ethical labor. Adeel achieves financial stability through the influence of his boss—a wealthy benefactor who serves as his gateway

to upward mobility. Similarly, Mustafa, initially portrayed as a directionless and carefree youth, gains social approval and family validation when he unexpectedly earns money through online gaming—a profession often stigmatized by older generations as unproductive or morally questionable. This narrative aligns with what Abbas (2021) describes as the “jackpot ideology” of the Pakistani middle class, where success is increasingly associated with luck, connections, or external validation rather than personal integrity or consistent effort. It reflects a societal fascination with instant gratification and material accumulation, mirroring global neoliberal trends that prioritize visibility and wealth over ethics and discipline (Bauman, 2013). By glorifying such overnight transformations, the drama inadvertently normalizes short-term success narratives, offering little space for value-driven or ethically grounded male role models. As a result, male characters’ worth is measured not by emotional intelligence or responsibility but by their ability to deliver financial outcomes—a reflection of middle-class anxieties tied to economic precarity and masculine identity (Qureshi, 2019). This thematic construction raises important concerns about how Pakistani media sustains unrealistic standards of success and reinforces gendered pressure on men to equate self-worth with income.

### **Women as Career Holders**

While *Kabhi Mein Kabhi Tum* introduces educated, strong, and articulate female characters, their professional identities remain largely symbolic. Sharjeena, the drama’s central female protagonist, is depicted as well-read, intellectually sharp, and emotionally resilient. However, her professional life functions only as a backdrop for domestic and relational conflicts rather than a domain of empowerment. Despite her education and awareness, her significance is anchored more in her emotional endurance than her career achievements. This depiction reflects what Saeed (2019) calls the “**aesthetic of endurance**” in Pakistani television dramas—where women’s worth is measured by their capacity for patience, sacrifice, and emotional suppression rather than their intellectual or professional agency. While Sharjeena embodies strength, her arc subtly reaffirms traditional expectations that women’s ultimate fulfillment lies in emotional rather than economic independence (Hassan & Jamil, 2021). Rubab, another female character, is presented as a successful businesswoman on paper. Yet her emotional volatility and vengeful behavior undermine her professional authority, reflecting the gendered contradiction that media often imposes on women: they may achieve success, but they must remain emotionally governed by love, family, and morality (Zafar, 2018). Rubab’s character demonstrates the persistent narrative trope that **emotional irrationality is intrinsic to femininity**, even among powerful women. Thus, her professional image serves more as a visual marker of progressiveness than as an authentic depiction of female autonomy. Through these portrayals, *Kabhi Mein Kabhi Tum* echoes the wider representational pattern in Pakistani dramas where women’s independence remains conditional—celebrated rhetorically but restricted narratively. It reveals how television continues to construct the illusion of empowerment while subtly reaffirming patriarchal boundaries.

### **Moral Blindness in Parenting**

A recurring motif throughout the drama is **moral blindness in parenting**, where parents’ judgments of their children’s worth are filtered through class-based and gendered biases. Mustafa is dismissed as irresponsible due to his unemployment, while Adeel is idealized for his financial achievements. The parents’ inability to discern emotional sincerity from material success mirrors what Kobalava (2017) identifies as “performative morality,” wherein external appearances take precedence over ethical substance. This parental partiality perpetuates emotional alienation and reinforces the idea that love and validation in middle-class families are transactional, contingent upon meeting societal standards. The portrayal highlights a broader cultural issue within South Asian households where moral worth is equated with social conformity rather than empathy, communication, or authenticity (Ahmad, 2020). By dramatizing this blindness, *Kabhi Mein Kabhi Tum* critiques the moral hierarchies

embedded within familial structures and exposes how emotional intelligence is undervalued in patriarchal systems of success and honor.

### **Emotional vs. Material Worth**

The drama's final theme juxtaposes **emotional richness** against **material wealth**, exposing the tension between genuine human connection and the societal obsession with status. Characters who exhibit empathy, vulnerability, and humility—qualities associated with emotional worth—are often dismissed until they acquire financial validation. This echoes the findings of Khan (2020), who notes that Pakistani middle-class narratives frequently link dignity to material stability rather than ethical conduct. Through Mustafa's transformation and Sharjeena's emotional resilience, the drama questions whether material progress necessarily equates to moral growth. It reveals how emotional authenticity is frequently overshadowed by performative respectability, a hallmark of middle-class identity politics (Zafar, 2018). By presenting this tension, *Kabhi Mein Kabhi Tum* invites audiences to reconsider what constitutes genuine success in a society where emotions are often subordinated to appearances.

### **Discussion**

The thematic analysis of *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* reveals that Pakistani middle-class morality operates not as an absolute measure of virtue, but as a socially constructed narrative shaped by economic hierarchies, gender expectations, and performative familial loyalty. This aligns with recent scholarship arguing that morality in South Asian media is often a class-inflected discourse, where ethical worth is equated with material success and social conformity rather than integrity or empathy (Bordo, 2023). Through the contrasting portrayals of Adeel and Mustafa, the drama exposes deep-rooted double standards in moral evaluation. Adeel, despite his manipulative and emotionally exploitative behavior, is consistently celebrated as the “ideal son” because his financial independence upholds the patriarchal ideal of masculine responsibility. Conversely, Mustafa's emotional intelligence and empathy are dismissed until his economic credibility is established—reflecting what Abbas (2021) describes as the “economization of virtue” within Pakistani middle-class discourse. The representation of female characters, particularly Sharjeena and Rubab, further underscores how gendered morality is policed through emotional performance rather than professional competence. Sharjeena's intellectual and emotional maturity is minimized within the domestic sphere, while Rubab's professional success is undermined by her emotional instability illustrating the enduring cultural expectation that women, regardless of agency or status, must embody traditional femininity to remain morally validated (Bay-Cheng, L. Y. (2019). Such portrayals echo Ahmed & Wahab's (2019) observation that Pakistani television continues to frame women's empowerment within patriarchal boundaries, allowing symbolic independence but denying substantive autonomy. Parenting in the drama also reflects moral blindness, wherein ethical judgment is replaced by performative loyalty and economic favoritism. Mustafa's emotional sincerity is overshadowed by Adeel's financial contribution, mirroring the broader cultural trend where familial “goodness” is defined by economic optics rather than ethical accountability (Bahnsen, 2018). Similarly, Sharjeena's parents' passivity in confronting her emotional abuse reinforces the middle-class obsession with social reputation over personal well-being—an issue highlighted in contemporary studies on Pakistani family dynamics and moral socialization (Bilwani & Anjum, 2022). Viewed through the lens of Social Constructionism, these portrayals exemplify how media narratives actively participate in constructing and legitimizing cultural definitions of morality. The drama becomes a discursive space where social hierarchies, gender norms, and economic values intersect to reproduce dominant moral codes (Haddow, 2017). Popular pedagogy in Canadian television: A feminist critical discourse analysis of Trailer Park Boys. Thus, *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* does not merely depict familial conflict—it performs ideological labor by naturalizing the very contradictions it critiques.

## Conclusion

*Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* transcends its surface-level romantic and familial tensions to emerge as a cultural critique of middle-class morality in contemporary Pakistan. By examining themes of success, gender roles, parental bias, and moral duplicity, the study demonstrates that the drama subtly endorses a performative morality—one that rewards visibility, conformity, and economic achievement over ethical substance. These findings reinforce the view that Pakistani television dramas, as cultural artifacts, both mirror and mold the moral consciousness of their audiences. Anchored in Social Constructionism, this analysis underscores that moral dichotomies—“good” versus “bad,” “ideal” versus “failure”—are not intrinsic truths but social inventions perpetuated through recurring media representations. The study therefore calls for a more critical approach to media storytelling, one that transcends entertainment and fosters ethical reflection. By challenging inherited moral assumptions and highlighting the interplay between virtue, value, and identity, *Kabhi Me Kabhi Tum* invites both creators and viewers to reconsider what it truly means to be “good” in a society where morality is continuously negotiated within the frameworks of class, gender, and reputation.

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