


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “My Army Family”: Civil-Military Representation in Military-Sponsored Television Content in Pakistan

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## Abstract

*Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021) and *Ehd-e-Wafa* (2019) are two scripted television shows produced by Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), the public relations wing of the Pakistan Armed Forces. Both shows merge the national, military spheres with domestic, civil spheres within its narrative universe, albeit in contrasting ways. This is a departure from military-sponsored scripted television made under the monopolistic state control of television. How do military-sponsored shows maintain the domestic and military spheres in their visual landscape? With attention to visual representation in the serials and using secondary data available on the production team’s choices, I argue that the conventions of domestic serial content force military characters to engage in issues of domesticity, such as marital conflict and reputation scandals. Military and familial logics meld together in instances where the military inserts itself into the domestic sphere within these shows, without embracing the messiness and moral ambiguity of such spaces.

**Keywords:** television; military; Pakistan; domesticity

## Introduction

The Pakistani military-sponsored drama serials *Ehd-e-Wafa* (2019) (Urdu: Vow of Loyalty) and *Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021) (Urdu: Women of Steel) were collaborative projects between the state and creative and financial organizations: the Pakistan military, the broadcast channel and the collaborating production house, and corporate sponsors.<sup>1</sup> Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), the public relations wing of the Pakistan Armed Forces, is a coproducer for both serials. After their prime-time broadcast on their respective channels (HUM TV and ARY Digital), each episode respectively was available on their official YouTube channel for a total of twenty-five and twenty-four

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<sup>1</sup> ISPR, HUM TV and Master Paints (the main corporate sponsor) have their logos on the online videos of the serial available on YouTube.

episodes for each serial. All episodes are in a one-hour format, with thirty-five to forty minutes of runtime each. Additionally, ISPR made the show available on their own YouTube channel. Both shows became successful in terms of viewership, as *Ehd-e-Wafa* was the most searched Pakistani show on Google in the Movies and TV category for 2019,<sup>2</sup> and *Sinf-e-Aahan* exceeds 10 million views on each episode on YouTube. In short, ISPR produced wildly popular shows in a competitive television market.

Both serials may look different on the surface. *Ehd-e-Wafa* is a typical ISPR serial as it is a part of the narrative universe of two successful ISPR-produced serials from the 1990s, *Sunehrey Din* (1991) (Urdu: Golden Days) and *Alpha Bravo Charlie* (1998). The prequels were aired on Pakistan Television (PTV), the state-owned broadcast channel, and produced by Showman Productions, the production house of acclaimed auteur Shoaib Mansoor. *Sinf-e-Aahan* is groundbreaking as the first serial focusing on female officers as LCs (lady cadets) at the Pakistan Military Academy. Both serials fall within the category of the military life drama serial because both serials touch upon the personal and professional lives of military officers. They are also indicative of the postnetwork era shift within the military life drama. As opposed to a state-dominated television industry of the 1990s where state officials decided programming content,<sup>3</sup> ISPR, the creative team and advertisers seek different objectives with the show's production: strong and consistent messaging about the military, state sovereignty and integrity (the aim of the military), authorial style and distinction (the aim of the creative team), and financial success and visibility (the aim of the corporate sponsor). Show creators, the authorial voices of the serial, must create a balance between these stakeholders for a show to attain success. These differences in production configurations for the serials have causal impact on the military life drama, representations of the military vis-à-vis the civil sphere on screen and its affective impact on the personal space.

In this article, I will dissect the ways in which the creators of *Ehd-e-Wafa* and *Sinf-e-Aahan* created a hybrid product – within an evolving postnetwork television industry in Pakistan – that maintained consistent messaging around the military while creating commercially viable television within a content ecosystem that sees drama serials as “feminized.” There are two main arguments within this article. One, institutional and industry-level shifts changed the representation of military and civil spheres within ISPR serials over time. The privatization of television and the concurrent change in the role of the military changed the choice of the creative teams from auteur writer-directors to established commercially successful teams. The change in production teams has led to different production choices and aesthetics within the serial. Since commercial drama serials invariably deal with issues of domesticity, the military sphere is no longer insulated from its wider civil context as it was in the 1990s, because military characters now venture out of their life in the barracks. I will analyze interviews of creative talent associated with the show and textual analysis of the shows themselves to illustrate this change. Two, military officers must now always uphold the integrity of the military, even when faced with

<sup>2</sup> Google Trends, “Google’s Year in Search” (<https://trends.google.com.pk/trends/yis/2019/PK/>) [accessed 25 February 2021].

<sup>3</sup> Munira Cheema, *Women and TV Culture in Pakistan: Gender, Islam and National Identity*, Women and Television Culture in Pakistan (London : I. B. Tauris, 2018).

issues of domesticity and family. This leads to military characters representing military and familial logics as complementary to each other. This is especially true for male military characters, whereas women military characters see the military as a protective space from societal pressure. The differences in representing civil and military spheres not only exist in representing institutional differences, but often encroach on the personal and intimate. Both these factors together show the reformulation of boundaries between the civil and military, the domestic and public, and the personal and public. I will use secondary interviews from show creators and visual text of the three serials as datapoints, using retroductive inference and textual analysis to illustrate these changes.

### Military and television serials in Pakistan

It is easy to see the military life drama serial as simple, unidirectional propaganda. Propagandistic content is intentional in its ideological message and communicates it as unambiguously as possible, famously done for the Nazi regime through Leni Riefenstahl's film, 1934's *Triumph of the Will*.<sup>4</sup> However, it does not account for the pragmatics of television production, especially in the postnetwork era, where viewers have more choice and control over their television consumption.<sup>5</sup> The theoretical problem posed here is that in an era when the reception of a television show can be so varied, it is difficult to argue that a political message carries the emotional resonance to reliably achieve its purpose. In fascist Italy, state and military institutions had to rely on cultural entrepreneurs who served as brokers between popular demand and state ideology and changed the form of theater.<sup>6</sup> In a modern, market-driven media ecosystem though, the military no longer has the coercive force readily available in authoritarian regimes.

For this reason, ISPR has become more important within the military establishment and given more responsibility to manage the image of the Pakistan Armed Forces in the public eye. The military establishment did not focus on public and media outreaches in the initial decades of its inception. ISPR mainly dealt with publications and press releases, and thought of itself more as a public informer. However, in the aftermath of the Kargil War in 1999, the Pakistan Armed Forces realized that they were losing the media narrative against India on the global stage.<sup>7</sup> This realization, coupled with the post-9/11 global environment and Pakistan's internal political volatility, thrust upon ISPR the role of improving public approval of the military. While the military apparatus has been mostly successful at suppressing dissenting voices in the political sphere,<sup>8</sup> especially in unstable loci of resistance in

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Sennett, "Film Propaganda: Triumph of the Will as a Case Study," *Framework* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 45–65.

<sup>5</sup> Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Mabel Berezin, "The Organization of Political Ideology: Culture, State, and Theater in Fascist Italy," *American Sociological Review* 56, no. 5 (1991): 639, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2096085>.

<sup>7</sup> Artur Makhlaiuk, "Constructing the Image of the Pakistan Armed Forces in the 21st Century," *Eastern Analytics* 14, no. 1 (2023): 112–24, <https://doi.org/10.31696/2227-5568-2023-01-112-24>.

<sup>8</sup> Aqil Shah, "The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan," in *The Army and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674419766>.

the periphery such as in Balochistan,<sup>9</sup> the armed forces have found it challenging to win popular approval, especially in urban centers dominated by the economic and political elite. This has been especially true in the time that followed direct or hybrid military rule. That war must be won in the arena of public opinion, where coercive tactics and violence may not yield similar results. Scripted television, purposefully built for popular entertainment, is ruled only by viewership. Whatever message ISPR may want to send out, it must send it out in a package that compels people to tune in to their televisions. Therefore, beyond its role as informer, ISPR functions as a media production house that produces content for popular consumption, including movies, television shows, and music. In step with the development of newer forms of media, ISPR has also developed a video game and reality competition shows to reach out to the public.<sup>10</sup>

The production of culture paradigm within sociological literature helps us theorize about the difficulties of creating television content while tending to multiple stakeholders including the military. A television network can have multiple decision-makers within the organization,<sup>11</sup> and a top-down implementation at times is impossible because different personnel are handling different aspects of the production process.<sup>12</sup> Scripted television serials based on fictionalized characters has been a recent turn in military life serials, which differ from biographical serials of real-life figures that ISPR invested in prior to the 1990s. Popular media production is not a riskless proposition for ISPR because ISPR is uncompromising on the cultural product's legibility. Despite the risk, ISPR's role of effectively communicating the army's position and function in society depends on reaching diverse, nationwide audiences, popular entertainment being one of the arenas where ISPR can achieve its objectives.

Pakistani television is the biggest media industry nationwide, and viewers continue to discuss popular drama serials in public and on social media, replicating the water cooler talk dynamic and all its implications.<sup>13</sup> Artistic production is open to interpretation by people from different places at different times,<sup>14</sup> thus making it harder for media productions to maintain legibility across the ethnically and linguistically diverse cultural terrain of Pakistan. Additionally, the longer the chain of communication, the higher the risk of cultural entropy;<sup>15</sup> audiences can use the same

<sup>9</sup> Shala Ashraf, Ikram Badshah, and Usman Khan, "The Role of Women's Political Activism against Enforced Disappearances in Balochistan: A Study of the Baluch Missing Persons," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 24, no. 6 (1 December 2023): 979–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2023.2265687>.

<sup>10</sup> Inter Services Public Relations Pakistan (<https://ispr.gov.pk/>) [accessed 30 November 2023].

<sup>11</sup> William T. Bielby and Denise D. Bielby, "'All Hits Are Flukes': Institutionalized Decision Making and the Rhetoric of Network Prime-Time Program Development," *The American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1287–313, <https://doi.org/10.1086/230412>.

<sup>12</sup> Clayton Childress, *Under the Cover: The Creation, Production, and Reception of a Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Horace M. Newcomb, and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8, no. 3 (1983): 45–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208309361170>.

<sup>14</sup> Wendy Griswold, "The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies," *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 5 (1987): 1077–117, <https://doi.org/10.1086/228628>.

<sup>15</sup> Terence E. McDonnell, *Best Laid Plans: Cultural Entropy and the Unraveling of AIDS Media Campaigns* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

material for various purposes, potentially much further from the original intention of ISPR. The serial's cultural power has been impacted by the wider changes occurring in Pakistan's television industry between the production of the prequels and the sequels. The military life drama distinguishes itself from other television serials because the military imposes creative constraints on representations of the military on screen.

### *Privatization, audience perception, and creative teams*

The environment in which military drama serials have been produced has changed in the past three decades. Since Pakistan Television's inception in 1964, the state maintained control over television in the form of a quasi-monopoly and generated revenue through national and regionally segmented audiences.<sup>16</sup> In 2002, the state regime allowed private broadcasters to be a part of the television industry, breaking PTV's impenetrable domination over broadcast television, which resulted in an intense proliferation of content, including religious content, on television.<sup>17</sup> The television drama serial expanded its scope to accommodate the increased demand for content because there were more television channels that needed more content for their audiences. PTV is still the most watched channel due to its availability on public airwaves. In recent times, cable channels have increasingly dominated entertainment, especially in the urban centers. While state television ran sixteen-to-eighteen-hour-long broadcasts up till 2002 with a special TV license funding PTV, private channels sought to offer twenty-four-hour programming to maximize advertisement revenue.

The privatization of the television industry changed the way television executives categorized content on Pakistani television, the gendering of content is a visible example of this change.<sup>18</sup> This has occurred for two reasons. One, the overbearing censorship regime loosened during the privatization drive in place at PTV, and the state cannot censor content as effectively as it did in a monopoly industry. It was content concerning women's issues that was highly censored: women's issues dramas had a specific time slot and were produced with distinct intentions in mind; perhaps more tellingly, PTV banned advertisements that pertained to sanitary towels or women's undergarments.<sup>19</sup> Based on interviews with administrators and producers of the 1980s, Munira Cheema describes how programming decisions were made with the input of state institutions. As opposed to the censorship regimes of the 1990s, censorship around gendered content is now more open because viewers now see drama serials on subjects previously considered taboo, which comes at times with offensive language and immodesty.<sup>20</sup>

Two, the personnel employed in state television and private channels are recruited with different orientations and priorities. In the PTV era, the state-employed cultural

<sup>16</sup> D. A. Pirzada, "Pakistan Television: A Survey," *Media Asia* 17, no. 3 (1 January 1990): 144–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.1990.11726339>.

<sup>17</sup> Kiran Hassan, "The Role of Private Electronic Media in Radicalising Pakistan," *Round Table* (London) 103, no. 1 (2014): 65–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2013.874164>; Taha Kazi, "Religious Television and Contesting Piety in Karachi, Pakistan," *American Anthropologist* 120, no. 3 (1 September 2018): 523–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13061>.

<sup>18</sup> Cheema, *Women and TV Culture in Pakistan*.

<sup>19</sup> Pirzada, "Pakistan Television," 149.

<sup>20</sup> Cheema, *Women and TV Culture in Pakistan*, 24.

elite determined the nature of programming while accounting for the censorship placed on women during General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization drive in the 1980s. However, the privatization drive created new opportunities and challenges for broadcast channels. Since audiences were no longer categorized as per the normative prescriptions of the cultural elite, the free market would shift power away from the educated cultural elite employed by PTV and give it to the audiences. In other words, state television was producing content with the educated citizen in mind whereas private channels catered to the modal consumer.

More specifically, television serials on women's issues transformed from a niche form of content to becoming a core message of prime-time drama serials, because producers now aim to please "conservative housewives."<sup>21</sup> Producers no longer have a captive audience and since private channels create content with a profit motive, they targeted the women because of their limited movement and disposable viewing time to watch television content. The commodification of content, in a sense, "feminized" the form of television serials. "Feminization" here exists as the perception of television executives of their modal consumer, while denying the broad audience of television serials in Pakistan, which includes both male and female audiences. It matters however at the level of production, the behind-the-scenes of television production. This had causal impact on the way PTV-era serials differ from *Ehd-e-Wafa* and *Sinf-e-Aahan*, particularly in their creative orientations. PTV serials of the twentieth century showed women negotiating and resisting their roles in a conservative Islamic society,<sup>22</sup> albeit in a subversive manner, as television of the time thought of itself as an educational medium. Today's feminist content must be integrated into an entertainment vehicle for it to gain traction.<sup>23</sup> In short, the serials of the past had gendered content, while the serial form has been gendered in the current commercial ecosystem.

The organizational structure for creatives is one reason such changes happened within television serials. PTV was a state channel where regional centers delegated production to the regional creative team, a group of educated elites who produced a few serials a year. They stuck to the conventions of the television serial, which took after theatrical conventions and catered to an audience that they presumed was aware of literary conventions. PTV in a way "told" audiences what they needed to see and implemented such normative ideas within the creation process. Shoaib Mansoor, the creator of the PTV prequels, expresses his disregard for popular appeal in alignment with PTV's ethos during the production of *Alpha Bravo Charlie*, as he overrides the imperative to play down to audiences:

Do not mistake this for arrogance, but, frankly, I do not wait for any sort of reaction to my plays. The director should have a basic sense of what he is doing, which audience he is targeting, what appeal it has for them, and how to

<sup>21</sup> Cheema, *Women and TV Culture in Pakistan*, 62.

<sup>22</sup> Shuchi Kothari, "From Genre to Zanaana: Urdu Television Drama Serials and Women's Culture in Pakistan," *Contemporary South Asia* 14, no. 3 (1 September 2005): 289–305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584930500463719>.

<sup>23</sup> Aisha Malik, "Transnational Feminist Edutainment Television in Pakistan: Udaari as Case Study," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 10, no. 2 (1 December 2019): 129–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974927619896774>.

handle the theme. I knew the audience for whom I made this serial. *Alpha Bravo Charlie* is not for the uneducated classes [emphasis added]. In fact, they might not even be able to understand a major portion of the play, the scenes shot in Bosnia, since it is in English. But I could hardly force the Bosnians to speak Urdu and dubbing their voices would have spoiled the entire effect. This section has Urdu subtitles, but to read them you have to be educated as well. Although it is important to produce something that has mass appeal, at times one must do something for a certain class alone. I made this serial from that point of view.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to Mansoor's disdain for popular appeal, the financial imperative of mass audiences and the "feminization" of television serials presented a challenge for HUM TV in producing *Ehd-e-Wafa*. The military life drama changed, as the creative teams behind the drama serials reoriented to a privatized and commercial multinetwork industry. The military sphere sketched in Mansoor's shows could ignore civil society as the characters and spaces were overwhelmingly associated with the military.

*Ehd-e-Wafa* and *Sinf-e-Aahan* could not afford such insulation without risking loss of popular appeal. The creative teams must rely on their commercial sensibilities to produce a television serial that meets the expectations of channel executives and advertisers. Hence its creators made different creative decisions than the bold stylistic choices made by Shoaib Mansoor. Instead of handing the reign to an auteur who writes and directs the show, production houses relied on successful creative teams with a proven track record of success. Saife Hassan, the director of *Ehd-e-Wafa*, previously worked with writer Mustafa Afridi on the successful 2016 HUM TV show, *Sang-e-Mar Mar (The Marble Stone)*, a show focusing on relationships strained under a tribal regime. Hassan explains how his decision to direct was linked to the script showing character arcs that extended beyond the military prep school atmosphere and suited the actor pool that was available to him.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Nadeem Baig, the director of *Sinf-e-Aahan*, also directed the successful commercial movies such as *Jawani Phir Nai Aani (Youth Never Comes Again)* in 2015. Baig, aware of the commercial constraints on content, considered *Sinf-e-Aahan* a risky project because the depiction of lady cadets on screen ran counter to the expectations set by television channels.<sup>26</sup> Media houses and their perception of market expectations now dictate the content of television serials in Pakistan.

### Creative choices

This change in orientation changed the visual language and portrayals of the military. The most visible difference between the series is the use of real army officers as amateur actors in the first two series and established actors playing army officers in the sequels. Shoaib Mansoor cast serving military officers as main leads, which made it easier to extract authentic performances, even if it came at the cost of production

<sup>24</sup> Navaid Rashid, "I Don't like to Hire Stars, I Make Stars: Shoaib Mansoor," *Herald Magazine*, 6 April 2019, <http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153795>.

<sup>25</sup> RAVA Entertainment, "Ehd e Wafa | Director SAIFE HASSAN | Exclusive Interview - YouTube," YouTube Video, 2019 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5Y2Eal7suQ>) [accessed 1 February 2022].

<sup>26</sup> "Nadeem Baig | Director of Sinf e Aahan | Mere Paas Tum Ho | Dil Lagi | Gup Shup with FUCHSIA," YouTube Video, 1:21:35, 13 December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8ejDaePYD4>.

difficulties.<sup>27</sup> The actors were not asked to perform; they were being asked to just be. Mansoor stayed in army barracks for months, researching the everyday life of the army, and this is reflected in his scripts for the first two series. He embodied the army life; the embodied metaphor is essentially a link of language to experience<sup>28</sup> and metaphors allow us to understand new experiences with respect to old experiences.<sup>29</sup> Mansoor's dedication to learning the military space meant the first two series merged background representations into the script and used amateur actors to connect to a readily available audience at a time when public television was the only choice. What audiences saw on screen was realism in its rawest sense; it may lack the dramatic visual enunciation of theater, but it made up in realist depictions of army life and nuanced intricacies and eccentricities of the characters that inhabited the space. The military habitus is on full display.

*Ehd-e-Wafa* and *Sinf-e-Aahan* do not follow this route. Modern audiences have plenty of options and are diverse in their nature. With channels fighting each other for television ratings, drama series are unsure whether they will gain lead-in audiences in a crowded market without a star cast, no matter how good the production values of the drama series. Scripts therefore align with the dramas HUM TV and ARY have been producing successfully in the past few years rather than military-sponsored content of the past. Creative teams reduce the friction between military and civilian representation by not directly engaging with contentious issues in the narrative, as the star of *Ehd-e-Wafa*, Ahad Raza Mir, readily admits in his interview.<sup>30</sup> For *Sinf-e-Aahan*, the lead cast for military characters instead underwent training during production, imprinting military representation on to existing creative practices.

The second creative choice that differs between the two eras is where the narrative arcs of army officers take place on screen. While Mansoor's soldiers mostly stay in the barracks in the PTV shows, the army officers on screen in the new era deal regularly with civilian life. Familial tensions constitute the storylines for all the main characters, as they are constantly caught between family demands and individual desire. *Ehd-e-Wafa's* core tension is placed outside of the domains of the military, thereby expanding the imaginary universe of the drama while at the same time maintaining the sanctity of the army space within that universe. The women of *Sinf-e-Aahan*, by virtue of being women, cannot be extricated from their domestic contexts. The characters' iconic shots visualizing skills within domestic emplacements and familial positions serve as the opening montage for the serial premiere. This strategy separates the challenges of civilian, domestic life from the discipline and clarity of army life, a strategy that interestingly makes the barracks a protective space for the women of *Sinf-e-Aahan*. The army barracks are depicted as utopias with no inner tensions. The series is still highly legible in its ideological message because, as I will elaborate at the end of the article, even when military and civilian spheres overlap, issues of domesticity are resolved through military logics.

<sup>27</sup> Rashid, "I Don't like to Hire Stars, I Make Stars."

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Winchester, "A Hunger for God: Embodied Metaphor as Cultural Cognition in Action," *Social Forces* 95, no. 2 (2016): 585, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sow065>.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Johnson, and George Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>30</sup> Maliha Rehman, "Sajal and I Are Naturally Very Private Individuals, Shares Ahad Raza Mir," *Images*, 16 December 2019, <https://images.dawn.com/news/1184218>.



The reason these choices were easier to make in the modern era of military drama serials is the ISPR's institutional response to market forces. ISPR adopted industry practices to compete in the television industry rather than dictate terms through overt coercion and censorship. The star of the serial, Ahad Raza Mir, stated in an interview that ISPR worked like any other production house.<sup>31</sup> It indicates organizational isomorphism,<sup>32</sup> which might have occurred in the intervening years due to increased competition and increased uncertainty in the field of cultural production. The fuzziness of the boundaries between the military sphere and television production has made it easier to collaborate on scripts that deviate further from tightly controlled ISPR projects in the past. ISPR has a better understanding of the television industry because, as opposed to the PTV era where ISPR could dictate terms, ISPR can no longer afford to be reticent from the production process since the television industry and audiences are more autonomous than in the PTV era.

In short, the military life drama serial adapted to the industrial and institutional changes because of Pakistan television's shift toward a privatized, multinet network industry. The creative teams shifted from state-employed cultural elite in the prequels to market-savvy production houses by *Ehd-e-Wafa's* time. Market forces compel show creators to include the civilian sphere along with the military sphere, which creates an interesting problem vis-à-vis representation of soldiers. Most officers in the Pakistan Armed Forces are men, and most representation of soldiers accentuates their stoic, masculine nature. How should they be depicted in a military life serial where most audience members are perceived to be women? The insertion and accommodation of military personnel in a "feminized" art form means that the depiction of masculinity within soldiers must also change in *Ehd-e-Wafa*, and *Sinf-e-Aahan* must change accordingly. In the following section, I analyze the ways in which these serials change depictions of civil-military spheres in the visual text based on the new industry conditions within Pakistani television.

### Civil-military representation in transition: Soldiers versus civil space, ideological burdens, and resolving conflicts

Establishing the military life drama as a distinct category of drama serials would be the first move. Military institutions know that media is a powerful tool that serve nationalist interests; the television screen has provided a way of propagating narratives of security and shaping public opinion in times of conflict or stress on the national level.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, providing insight into military life is important because information about the military lifestyle is an important factor for potential recruits.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Something Haute, "Ahad Raza Mir in an Exclusive Heart to Heart | Sajal Aly | Ehd e Wafa | Yeh Dil Mera | SA1," YouTube Video, 34:23, 3 December 2019 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLHP9ln9ans> [accessed 6 April 2023]).

<sup>32</sup> Paul DiMaggio, and Walter Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6 (1983): 147.

<sup>33</sup> Haidee Wasson, and Lee Grieveson, eds., *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520965263>.

<sup>34</sup> Douglas Yeung, and Brian Gifford, "Potential Recruits Seek Information Online for Military Enlistment Decision Making: A Research Note," *Armed Forces & Society* 37, no. 3 (1 July 2011): 534–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X10366104>.

Representations of the military have been overwhelmingly masculine in the past. Narratives of masculinity and war are interconnected,<sup>35</sup> and representations of the military inevitably deal with masculinity and the military as a nationalistic, masculine ecosystem. The military life drama serial therefore incorporates these three elements into the visual language of the drama serial. Representations of soldiers on screen are exercises in idealistic depictions of masculinity exemplified by bravery and nationalism, which could be construed as depictions of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>36</sup> Through retroductive inference<sup>37</sup> and by analyzing the narrative structure of the three serials in question, we can arrive at the constituent components for the military life drama.

A military life drama serial must depict an army officer either receiving training at the military academy or performing duties for God and country in the barracks or on the border. The military officers are held to high ideals. Certain values and scripts regarding military personnel – nationalistic, sacrificial, family oriented, protector, masculine – are prioritized, homogenizing the military space, and creating symbolic lines of exclusion.<sup>38</sup> The role of the armed forces in the national and social context is established as integral and unimpeachable, while dispelling or tackling popular negative discourses at the same time. The ladies of *Sinf-e-Aahan* tackle these issues more consciously than all other iterations of the military life drama serial and tackle them in interesting ways, which are beyond the scope of this article. However, they do not break away completely from the conventions of the military life serial.

The boundary-making processes relating to collective identity and nationality<sup>39</sup> occur through visual texts such as drama serials. The transformation of the drama serial into a commercial entity meant that insular, military worlds could not be depicted as separate from society. A PTV drama serial could solely focus on the military sphere, with minimal reference to the civil sphere, or any reference to a popular audience. Current serials drive their narrative pace from domestic, “feminized” issues, which lie entirely in the civil sphere. This boundary-making process also reformulates the boundary between the public and the personal, thus inserting the military into intimate spaces. This clash of worlds changes the representation of military spheres and civilian spheres in three ways over time: military officers’ engagement with wider society while maintaining boundaries, the ideological burden placed on military characters, and the resolution of conflict when domestic problems infiltrate military spheres. There are three key visual sequences

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<sup>35</sup> Harry Brod, Michael Kaufman, and Men’s Studies Association, *Theorizing Masculinities*, Research on Men and Masculinities Series 5 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); R. W. Connell, and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.

<sup>37</sup> Samantha B. Meyer, and Belinda Lunnay, “The Application of Abductive and Retroductive Inference for the Design and Analysis of Theory-Driven Sociological Research,” *Sociological Research Online* 18, no. 1 (2013): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2819>.

<sup>38</sup> Karley Richard, and Sonia Molloy, “An Examination of Emerging Adult Military Men: Masculinity and US Military Climate,” *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 21, no. 4 (October 2020): 686–98, <https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000303>.

<sup>39</sup> Michèle Lamont, and Virág Molnár, “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 167–95.

common to all military life serials that display this change in representation: scenes establishing the differences between the military and civilian spheres, scenes establishing the ideological burden of male military characters, and scenes of soldiers resolving a domestic issue for another military character.

To understand the analysis, it is necessary to summarize the narrative arcs of all the shows, references to which will be made throughout the article. The narrative universe begins in *Sunehrey Din (Golden Days)*, where four gentlemen cadets (Safeer, Faraz, Gulsher, Kashif) join the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA). The serial covers their journey in the academy, resulting in their graduation at the end of the serial. *Alpha Bravo Charlie* picks up on the journey of three of these newly commissioned officers (Faraz, Gulsher, and Kashif) as they contend with their roles within the barracks. *Ehd-e-Wafa* continues Faraz's journey as he rises to the role of general, and his son (Saad) begins his own journey in the army. Saad and his friends from high school (Shahzain, Shariq, and Shehryar) go through their own challenges after a humiliating incident that tears them apart. Finally, in *Sinf-e-Aahan*, a new generation of lady cadets (Pariwesh, Arzoo) is inducted at PMA, who begin their own journey within the Pakistan Army under the supervision of both male and female army officers (Major Usama and Major Samia). Some characters from *Sunehrey Din* and *Alpha Bravo Charlie* appear in the serial, bringing the narrative universe full circle within *Sinf-e-Aahan*. While knowing the narrative contextualizes the scenes presented here, the scenes themselves are self-contained units of analysis as they perform a narrative purpose in a military life drama serial.

### *Separation of military and civilian spheres within the visual text*

A military life drama serial presents the military sphere, a space that is distinct from the nonmilitary or civil sphere, a space that is nationalistic, away from the disorder and messiness of social ties. While the PTV serials focused entirely on male characters that would join the army and did not have to show civil spheres beyond the characters' families and backgrounds, *Ehd-e-Wafa* only had one of the main four characters join the military sphere. The character arcs for three lead characters were within the civil sphere, which was messy, volatile, and disorderly. The show creators had to establish a visual language in which it was clear that the military was unlike other institutions that formed the civil sphere.

The show creators for *Ehd-e-Wafa* established this separation of spheres early in the show, and this is established early in the show's run. The plot revolves around four close friends studying at a prestigious boarding school, which is seen as an army prep school. In a bizarre turn of events, the group of friends find themselves implicated in a harassment scandal. The school summons their families to deal with this complicated situation. I will analyze a sequence of scenes where each character meets a member of his family for the first time since the accusations. For the sake of analytical comparability, I will restrict my analysis to the widest shot within each scene to demonstrate the visual differences made by the creators to distinguish the military sphere from the civilian sphere.

Shehryar, the son of a humble musician who plays in a marching band (see Figure 1), sits with his father in the campus lawns outside the academic building. Shariq (see Figure 2), the brother of a nurse working two jobs to support her widowed



Figure 1. Shehryar and his father, *Ehd-e-Wafa* (2019).



Figure 2. Shariq and his sister, *Ehd-e-Wafa* (2019).

mother and brother, is being hit by his sister in the seating area of the campus stadium. Shahzain (see Figure 3), a member of an affluent rural family, is being kissed by his grandfather on the forehead outside the campus café, which is adjacent to the volleyball court.

These three characters confront the reactions of their family members in open spaces around the school campus. These frames represent the characters of the civil sphere, their emotional valence, and the messiness of the social environments that these characters inhabit in their lives outside of campus. The *mise-en-scène* in these frames reflects the diverse ways in which the characters confront the humiliation and



Figure 3. Shahzain and his grandfather, *Ehd-e-Wafa* (2019).

shame in the aftermath of this scandal. Shehryar's father holds his hand while he tries to understand his son and overcome his disappointment and confusion at the same time. Shariq's sister hits him in anger and shame as he protects himself from her blows. Both these characters, belonging to lower socioeconomic classes, disappear into the anonymity and vastness of the campus, their humiliation and shame visible to the wandering observer on campus. In contrast, Shahzain's higher socioeconomic status is evident from the way he is shown to rise above his environment. Shahzain's grandfather intentionally ignores his grandson's guilt and embraces him with love, almost dismissive of the scandal that casts a cloud over their encounter. Their status elevates them above their surroundings as the students play Volleyball on in a blur and their driver looks at them in the background. These three characters' scenes depict different emotions, physicality, and attitudes toward moral and social problems. However, a common thread brings them together: the role of men in society vis-à-vis their families. The show is clear in displaying each character as a man associated with a family. Saad (Figure 4), the son of an army general, does not get the same treatment. He must deal with his shame in a closed room under the unrelenting gaze of his disappointed father. It is dealt with internally, swiftly, and unequivocally.

However, such clear boundaries between the two spheres are only for the male officers. For *Sinf-e-Aahan*, the script flips entirely since women cannot be fully separated from their domestic contexts. The lady cadets and their journeys within the military sphere are tied to their locations in their family and domestic life. Like the scene in *Ehd-e-Wafa*, *Sinf-e-Aahan* deploys a montage sequence at the start of the show to show the women characters of the show in their homes. The screenplay locates the journey of these women as military officers as a direct contrast to their domestic challenges and problems. Therefore, the visual language of *Sinf-e-Aahan* must juxtapose their domestic lives with their development as military officers. The montage shows the lead characters located in their homes in moments of contemplative work (see Figures 5 and 8), solitude (see Figure 6), and reflection



Figure 4. Saad and his father, *Ehd-e-Wafa* (2019).



Figure 5. Rabia decorating a cake, *Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021).

(see Figure 7). The montage sets up the domestic space as something to overcome before these characters inevitably join the army. The domestic here again is associated with the women characters.

Like *Ehd-e-Wafa*, the lead characters represent diversity in socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and religion. An establishing sequence showing the diversity of the Pakistan



Figure 6. Mahjabeen sitting on a chair, *Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021).



Figure 7. Arzoo praying in church, *Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021).

Army is a critical part of the ISPR serial because it shows the national spirit and diversity of the army. Going one step beyond *Ehd-e-Wafa*'s narrative reach, the montage of *Sinf-e-Aahan* anchors us in the home as the starting point of their journeys, something that none of the PTV shows was interested in within their narrative for the



Figure 8. Shaista drawing a military officer, *Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021).

army officers. The audiences received them as soldiers, men going about their lives in the barracks as they dealt with personal and professional challenges. For *Sinf-e-Aahan*, the lady cadets are anchored to their place in domestic spaces, which the show continuously refers to, to measure their journey. The military sphere is seen as a protective space where they recognize, challenge, and confront their domestic positions throughout the visual landscape. To grant these characters a way to communicate that emancipatory arc, the show's writer, Umera Ahmed, grants the women of *Sinf-e-Aahan* inner voices throughout the show, whether it be through noticeboard achievements (see Figure 9) or letter writing (see Figure 10). These inner voices are critical in maintaining the narrative pace of the show by constantly bringing the lady cadets' home situations into narrative and visual focus while reducing the overlap between the military and civilian spheres. This iconic presentation of women skirts the issue of dealing with the masculinity issue within military life for most of the runtime of the serial.

The creative team and ISPR are conscious of real-life factors affecting women's integration within the armed forces in Pakistan. While women have been allowed to be inducted in the medical core of the armed forces since 1948, lady cadets training for combat have only been a reality since 2007. Pakistan's first woman three-star general, General Nigar, achieved her position in 2015. The women of *Sinf-e-Aahan* need to be consciously reconciled in the visual text within the military sphere. Therefore, the women of *Sinf-e-Aahan* are given a liminal space, a clash of distinct worlds that exist inside and outside the military world. This space is the scenes shot in the grounds of PMA, where the families of the lady cadets are saying farewell to them. This is the only sequence of the show (see Figures 11 and 12) where domestic and military issues coexist within the same visual landscape. Family and army can be seen





Figure 9. Pariwesh putting her picture on company notice board, *Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021).



Figure 10. Shaista writing to her grandmother, *Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021).

in these sequences, where army officers offer assurances and take over the lady cadets' supervision and care from their parents and siblings. The sequence of the ladies joining PMA on their first day therefore serves as the transition sequence of characters crossing over from civilian to military life.



Figure 11. Shaista and her father, *Sinfe-Aahan* (2021).



Figure 12. Mahjabeen's father and Major Usama (right), *Sinfe-Aahan* (2021).

***Ideological burdens – military characters, men, and ideology***

However, the military sphere cannot contain the moral ambiguity of the civilian sphere and the shows' creators make that difference immediately visible. More so than the female characters, it is the male military characters that must remain

infallible during any controversy that might involve a loss of reputation. There are multiple instances across all shows where an army officer is given an opportunity to protect their honor and uphold their code. In the scene mentioned before in *Ehd-e-Wafa*, Saad, the son of an army officer (Figure 4) is standing embarrassed in front of his father in an office. As opposed to the civilian sphere, the military sphere does not handle scandals in messy, open environments; it happens inside within the setting of a simple, austere office room. Additionally, the emotionality in Saad's confrontation with his father is distant and muted. Not only does Saad's father maintain distance with his disgraced son, but he also appears in this meeting in his camouflage uniform. Saad's father inhabits both roles as a father and a military officer simultaneously; his personal feelings are inextricable from the military's official position on incidents of harassment. He is clear to his son about his disappointment and the violation of trust brought on by this incident. The burden placed on Saad's character to not only be personally unimpeachable but to represent an unimpeachable image of the military. The soldier becomes a man who must carry the ideological burden of being associated with the army, and that could only be a particular type of man. Saad spends the rest of the serial emulating his father, the ideal soldier in his eyes, and tries to match his expectations. The military sphere's sharp boundaries do not allow Saad's character fallibility or vulnerability. Men are not vulnerable in the visual universe of the modern drama serial.

For most of the show after this sequence, each character pursues his own life independent of the influence of the other characters after they end their friendship. Their friendship is a central theme explored in the show, but they are allowed to live their own lives separate from one another. And in this manner, the show's creators achieve two objectives. One, they preserve the sanctity of the military sphere by separating it from the wider social context. Two, the creators are still able to maintain the narrative pace of the HUM TV drama serial, as the other three characters negotiate their lives and personal relationships within an ever-changing and complicated social environment. Any attempt at reconciliation in the future falls through because when the spaces are reconciled in the visual of the serial, they happen in a military hospital in the national interest. The separation of spheres allows the complicated story lines to play out without the involvement of the army characters.

The concession of the military sphere to the civilian sphere changed the way soldiers were depicted in the PTV shows compared with in *Ehd-e-Wafa* and *Sinf-e-Aahan*. While privatization and the opening of market forces might suggest that representations of military personnel became more diverse, it ended up having the opposite effect. The three lead male characters of the prequels, unburdened by the necessity to justify the army's role in society, display individuality, interiority, and vulnerability in a way that the main male military character in both *Sinf-e-Aahan* and *Ehd-e-Wafa* is unable to display in the military sphere. Since the prequels did not have the civil sphere or women characters beyond love interests, the prequels focused more on the military's internal issues, particularly those related to socioeconomic differences and loyalties to country and family. The men did not have to defend themselves against the messy civil sphere. Therefore, army officers in this world could have doubts, question their commitment.



Figure 13. Gulsher thinking by himself, *Alpha Bravo Charlie* (1998).

*Alpha Bravo Charlie* asks none of its characters to live up to the lofty ideals that Saad must emulate in *Ehd-e-Wafa*. I will focus here solely on the introduction of the male army officers in their respective PTV-era serials to show the nuanced portrayal of men in these shows. Like *Ehd-e-Wafa*, all three friends in *Alpha Bravo Charlie* come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and that affects their interaction during this serial. However, even though all characters belong in the military sphere, two of the three male officers in the show are depicted as complex men from the first episode. In an introductory scene at the start of the show, Gulsher, a newly minted commissioned officer in the Pakistan Army, is shown having an internal monologue, wrestling with his status anxiety as he joins his new post (see Figure 13). Unlike his two affluent friends, Gulsher is the son of a *havildar*, a noncommissioned officer in the army. Gulsher worries about his financial responsibility and dreams of different ways in which to handle his relationships in the face of such constraints. Kashif, the son of a serving general, is even allowed to question his commitment to the army, constantly being labeled as lazy and cowardly for the first half of the serial. While inequalities in their upbringing have shaped these individuals differently, *Alpha Bravo Charlie* and its deliberate ignorance of the civil sphere releases its characters from the burden of defining themselves as ideal soldiers and men. These characters are allowed to have complex interiorities when they must not constantly guard the military sphere from encroachment of the civilian sphere. The conflict and boundary-making processes between the military and civil spheres within the serial cause *Ehd-e-Wafa* to show a narrower range of masculinity compared to its prequels, which were made in eras of high censorship and control.

The fact that the prequels could slow down the narrative pace of the serial to portray a man's internal emotions enriches the depictions of soldiers on screen. They are allowed to have doubts, face socioeconomic realities without necessarily living up to the ideals of the military man. Their thoughts may reflect this range, whereas none



Figure 14. Safer drinking alcohol after being assaulted by a rival gang, *Sunehrey Din* (1991).

of the actions they take in the serials make them less than the ideal army officer. This display of vulnerability in turn presents an interesting problem for one of the themes tackled by both shows, a military man's conflicting loyalties between national duty and familial duty.

In *Sunehrey Din* and *Alpha Bravo Charlie*, the presentation of the civil sphere is not of adjustment, but of confrontation. While the civil sphere is almost entirely absent in *Alpha Bravo Charlie*, the civil sphere's presentation in *Sunehrey Din* is simplistically depicted as one of disorder, indiscipline, and corruption. Like Gulsher's introduction in *Alpha Bravo Charlie*, Safer, the protagonist in *Sunehrey Din*, is shown as a misguided, aggressive teenager, far from the ideal of a military man. He is intelligent and yet he rides his motorcycle with no care for his neighbors, picks a fight with other men on the streets, and has loose moral boundaries. Safer's descent into corruption is undeniable when his family finds him in a state of inebriation after a fight with a local motorcycle gang (see Figure 14). Despite the censorship laws governing PTV at the time, Shoaib Mansoor implied Safer's inebriation through clever blocking of the bottle behind the staircase. Mansoor's soldiers retain their humanity and fallibility throughout the course of the show.

This depiction almost runs afoul of the censorship laws of PTV, and yet Mansoor was able to depict a man struggling to find his place in society. This fallible, vulnerable man is only found in the civil sphere, and this is evident in other male characters Mansoor writes for this show. For instance, Safer's friends go to the gym and perform masculinity in a nonintellectual, brutish manner, in almost a caricature of the struggling young men. Once Safer joins PMA, his personality starts to adapt to the discipline and regimentation of the academy, which is shown as a positive influence on his personal development. This fallibility and vulnerability displayed on screen is not seen in *Ehd-e-Wafa* from the military character. This change in masculine representation stems from the fact that HUM TV serials emplace characters in plots that emphasize societal constraints on the character's choices. The prequels are written as character studies that investigate the internal motivations of the

characters. Men in the PTV serials had interior worlds. While the lady cadets of *Sinf-e-Aahan* are granted inner voices, men in the modern serials do not display that inner world.

### **Marriage and martyrdom: What army men owe to each other**

Military men must uphold their dignity, especially what they owe each other. Scenes where army officers consider marrying widows, especially those of army martyrs, those who died in battle, is a key frame of evidence to show the unimpeachable character of military men. While the PTV-era shows continue with the vulnerable depiction of male army officers, the postnetwork-era shows erase this interior voice for the male army officers in the show. I will juxtapose both scenes to elicit this stark contrast in the representation of male officers on screen in both eras.

In *Alpha Brave Charlie*, Gulsher is presumed dead during combat, and his wife, Shehnaz, is now a widow with a son. Gulsher's friend, Faraz, is considering proposing to Shehnaz but is reluctant to go against what he says is "the army culture" (see Figure 15). As his father tries to convince him to consider marrying Shehnaz, Faraz repeatedly invokes the army culture of honoring widows. He resists the idea of marriage to a martyr's widow and invokes the army way of life.

Later, when Shehnaz proposes marrying another army officer and friend, Kashif, he resists the idea of marrying by quoting the army culture (see Figure 16). However, Shehnaz and other family members do not find the army culture arguments to be convincing. Ultimately, everyone sets aside the deference to army culture in favor of domestic and religious arguments, such as supporting a family and following the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. It is the male military characters who display doubt about their capability of their commitment. All these shots are up-front close-ups, separating the context from the character, showing inner worlds rather than indexical images. The focus remains solely on the personal feelings of these characters, as they handle personal desire with responsibility to their brothers in arms. Army is secondary, their characters stay in the foreground.

*Sinf-e-Aahan* does not let its central male military character, Major Usama, forget that responsibility to his family and responsibility to the army are two separate realms of relationships. Major Usama oversees training of the lady cadets along with the company's female officer, Major Samia. While both characters are portrayed as upstanding characters, it is Major Usama who carries the burden of being both a patriotic soldier and a dedicated family man. More than the burden of training lady cadets in the best way possible, Usama's personal life becomes a focal point of his character arc. Usama marries the widow of his best friend, who died in battle during a military operation. *Sinf-e-Aahan's* Major Usama provides a stark contrast to the masculine role played by the officers of *Alpha Bravo Charlie*. In *Sinf-e-Aahan*, Major Usama, on the other hand, is unable to be honest in moments of vulnerability. When Usama's wife asks him about her husband's final moments, Usama's sense of duty prevails in a moment that could have potentially pitted country versus the family. Taimur, the martyred husband, whispers "Pakistan Zindabad" (Urdu: Long Live Pakistan) in his dying moments. Since Usama is placed in a position where he must be loyal both to his friend's commitment to the country and the family he leaves behind, he instead tells his wife that Taimur's dying words were about his wife and daughter



Figure 15. Faraz and his father, *Alpha Bravo Charlie* (1998).

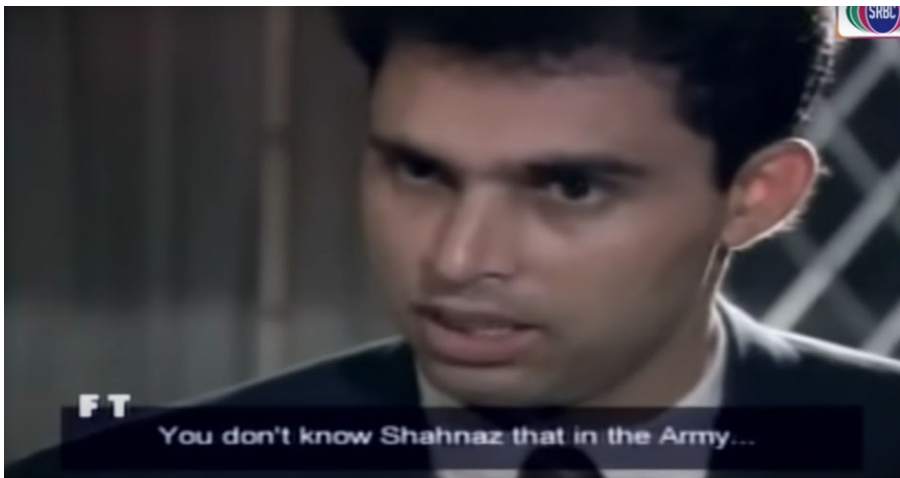
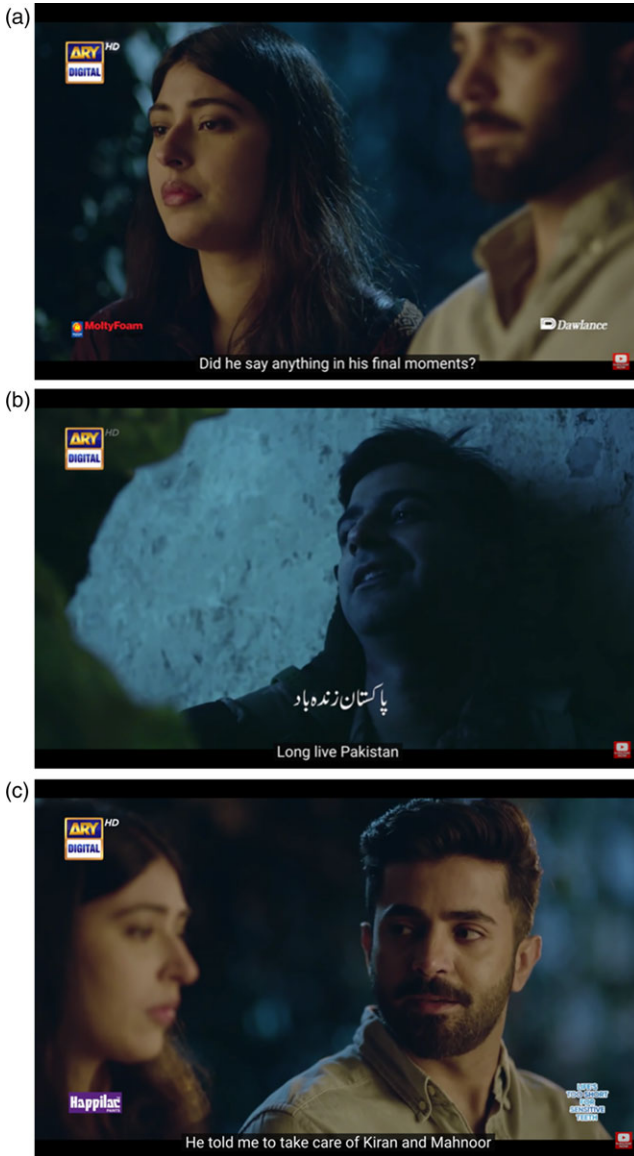


Figure 16. Kashif talking to Shehnaz, *Alpha Bravo Charlie* (1998).

(see Figure 17a–c). The absence of his own voice, his motivations, and desires, is a result of the narrative’s need to have a military officer that fulfils every expectation placed on him by the army. Simply, it is honor and duty above all other values and considerations. The army is now firmly posted in the intimate space.

***Army family: Military resolutions to domestic disputes***

The separation between the military and civil spheres, while important to the dual objectives of ideological integrity and market necessity, is untenable. Since these two



**Figure 17.** Scene between Kiran and Usama, *Sinf-e-Ahan* (2021).

worlds will inevitably overlap within the modern drama serial, the production team must find a way to recognize the overlap and resolve it amicably to the satisfaction of ISPR and other stakeholders. Thus, we see the emergence of an interesting overlap: the role of army officers in resolving domestic disputes. This becomes visible first in *Ehd-e-Wafa*. One of the storylines revolves around Haris, Saad's course mate at the Pakistan Military Academy. Despite his reluctance to share his personal troubles, Haris reveals to Saad that his parents are getting separated, causing him to underperform at the academy. Haris's arc has been established earlier as a promising





Figure 18. PMA commanding officers discussing Haris's case, *Ehd-e-Wafa* (2019).

cadet and Saad's competitor for the Sword of Honor, the Academy's prize for the most distinguished cadet at the time of graduation. Saad learns of Haris's torment and informs the commanding officers of this problem. The officers are concerned in separate scenes about Haris's declining performance at the academy.

The office setting (see Figure 18) encapsulates the military nature of the space; the Pakistan flag – along with the flags of army battalions – feature twice in the frame, once on the desk and once on the right side of the table. The unnatural positioning of the guest officers should be noted here as well; they face each other, horizontal on the frame of reference. In a natural office setting, the expectation would be that the officers would face the commanding officer, whose office they are in for this meeting. In this frame, the camera – and by extension the viewer – becomes a part of the meeting. The only dialogue in this short scene is delivered by the commanding officer, who says in English, “Alright gentleman. We should meet them.” The viewer learns later that the commanding officer gives his approval to call Haris's parents in for an informal discussion regarding his future.

The military sphere, through its characters, invites the civil sphere to enter the military space, albeit on its own terms. The officers' concern for Haris is about his performance, but the mental health aspect of Haris's well-being is not touched on by the officers. The officers later explicitly tell Haris's parents that it is not usual for them to interfere in a cadet's personal matters. However, Haris's potential compels them to assess their role in this situation. It is here that the showrunners speed up the narrative pace. Both parents quickly explain the societal and familial pressures that have created barriers within their relationship. The messy civil sphere asserts itself again in the narrative to which the military officer's response is quick and predictable: they offer both parents a chance to work out their problems, which, as per narrative convenience, they achieve within a couple of minutes within the episode (see Figure 19).

It is in this sequence where the hybridity of the spheres is most evident, even though the predominant military understanding of relationships and spheres



Figure 19. Haris reuniting with his parents, *Ehd-e-Wafa* (2019).



Figure 20. Saad and Haris hugging on a road in the Pakistan Military Academy, *Ehd-e-Wafa* (2019).

influences the representations of family, gender, and society rather than the civil sphere in which these relationships and problems originally emerge. This slippage does not drive the overall arc for Saad's character forward, but represents the humanness of military officers, a theme explored in the prequels through different ways. However, this mixing still produces interesting opportunities for showrunners to explore the nature of masculinity and the military's constant messaging within the show. In the final scene concerning this storyline, Haris runs back to his dorms in ecstasy, and encounters Saad on the way (see Figure 20). Instead of acting like a

gentleman cadet, Haris repeatedly hugs Saad, thanking him for his role in the whole story.

The emotionality of the scenes matches the ones created in the civil society spheres witnessed in Figures 1–3. They are both physically close and the verticality of the characters is level, thus creating the ethos of brotherhood and parity in a way that is rarely seen in the military sphere. There is no hierarchy to be presented in this scene when the clean lines and order are visible in the background. This aspect of the military sphere is not seen in the prequels when similar relationships and ideas are explored in military-sponsored content. The hug is eventually broken up by a drill sergeant who admonishes them for celebrating when there is no obvious cause for celebration. In effect, he brings the characters back into the military sphere, signaling the end of this hybrid space.

There are many examples of this overlap within *Sinf-e-Aahan*, a show where lady cadets and their lives are hard to keep outside the barracks. In one episode, Pariwesh and her father encounter their tribal chief in the confines of PMA, a power dynamic that Pariwesh's Baluchi father considers a threat to her daughter's future. He asks Major Usama to intervene and help him overcome the potential power dynamic, who in turn recruits the help of his boss, the battalion commander at PMA. The visual representation of this dynamic is like the interaction of Haris and Saad from *Ehd-e-Wafa*. Since the matter at hand concerned the possible loss of Pariwesh as a lady cadet, military officers stepped in to resolve the situation. In this case, before a possible confrontation could occur, the battalion commander meets the tribal chief and praises him on encouraging women to enlist in the army from his area. As such, they praise him and credit him with a position of authority that he would find hard to deny later. Again, here within the visual universe, darkened and private army offices signify privacy (see Figure 21a). Even more significant in terms of lighting decisions, the tribal chief is lit with a soft halo, making him the odd element within the dark office (see Figure 21b). The army places itself in the middle of this hierarchical exercise of power and thus resolves this domestic dispute. Its resolution is always in open space, a conciliatory tone for all to witness (see Figure 21c).

Reputational scandals are worth intervention by military officials if it means the loss of a potential cadet. LC Arzoo, the Christian female officer in the serial, is threatened by her ex-boyfriend who insinuates that he will release their pictures without her permission. To avoid a scandal, she preemptively tries to resign from the army. Major Samia, shocked at this act, asks Major Usama to intervene and help the situation. LC Arzoo invites her ex-boyfriend to meet within PMA premises and tries to ask him for the pictures herself. When that fails, Usama intervenes and procures the phone with the pictures through intimidation and by using his position as an army officer. A critical note here is that this is not an official response to the matter; no other army officials are involved in this process and no formal inquiry is initiated by army supervisors. This is a direct intervention of a military character in civil space, and the matter is dealt with in civil space, as the creator reveals later in the episode.

No recourse is made to other avenues, and civilian rules are suspended in this instance. While women officers assert their voice in this situation, it is ultimately the incorruptible male officer who uses his power to resolve this situation. In the frames showing the offending ex talking to an officer, it is visible that the offender only leans forward toward the male officer, even when his posture is not as upright as Arzoo's

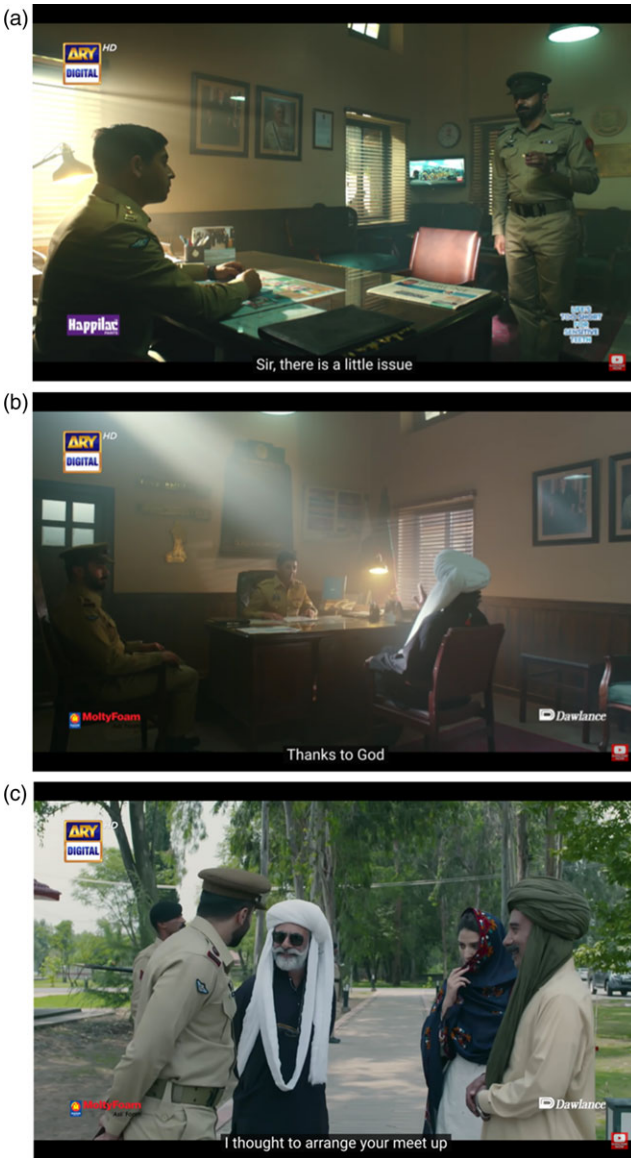


Figure 21. Sequence between Major Usama, the tribal chief and Pariwesh, *Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021).

posture (see Figure 22a and Figure 22b). The offender is framed leaving the premises, passing through the two lady officers as Major Usama stays in the background (see Figure 22c). While the offender is in an open space, the showrunners make him walk between the upright female officers, exemplifying the change in the power differential within this situation. However, it is not emanating from the female officers themselves but the backing of the male officer in the background. The show returns to its normal rules once this scene is over.



Figure 22. Scene between LC Arzoo, Major Samia and Major Usama, *Sinf-e-Aahan* (2021).

This discussion ultimately compels us to ask why such narratives exist within the military life serial. The visual universe of the modern military life serials will have a confrontation of military and domestic worlds, where the former is disciplined, morally upright, and internally ordered; and the latter is disorderly, disruptive, and inconsistent. In such cases, the military culture and logic prevails over other ways of thinking and acting in the serial. The move is deliberate because military recruitment, particularly in Pakistan, draws on our affective attachments to country and society. It particularly encroaches upon the personal and intimate space, as we, the audience,

and even army officers are asked to behave similarly in their personal lives. There is significant literature to suggest that the military requires personal commitment that leads into personal and social spaces. Those who interact with such a rigid security apparatus often reassess their identities as legible citizens and members of society.<sup>40</sup> The military engages in affective management of grieving families of fallen soldiers in Pakistan, to cultivate a sense of loyalty and sacrifice.<sup>41</sup> Even on screen, army families have always been told to constrain themselves in showing grief and regret, so much so that they often are told not to let the personal overwhelm patriotic sentiments.<sup>42</sup> It is in television serials such as the scripted shows of the PTV and postnetwork eras that we see such ideas on emotionality and personal spaces being enacted in military spaces upon military characters.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the textual analysis along with the data on institutional shifts show the changing nature of ideological positioning of military and civilian worlds embedded in popular entertainment. With viewers in control of their content, producers and censors have little power in directing the reception of the television serial, creating one possible solution in the immersion of the military sphere in the melodramatic, fast-paced world of gendered content on private television. The changes in the industry and television institutions have led to a change of personnel, which have different goals and aesthetics in mind for television production.

Whenever overlaps do occur, the military world prevails upon the civil world. This is expected since military life serials are public image-building exercises for the Pakistan Armed Forces. The difference lies in the way these worlds coexist together within the narrative universe. *Sinf-e-Aahan*, in many ways an outlier compared to the other shows, exhibits the trend in which civil-military representation is changing in the postnetwork era. What remains to be discussed is the implications of these representations in drama serials. The analysis presented in this article raises questions on the nature of such hybridity of military and civil institutions, its potential benefits, and obvious limitations in the Pakistani context. Specifically, the article raises two questions about military involvement in civilian spheres for political ends in Pakistan and what such questions mean for future research on Pakistan and its cultural sphere.

The first question pertains to whether the Pakistani military establishment can maintain their involvement in the social sphere without “hollowing out” political and cultural entities of their meaning.<sup>43</sup> On the national level, the Pakistani media has vehemently debated the purpose and efficacy of the hybrid experiment, the popular

<sup>40</sup> Sahana Ghosh, “‘Everything Must Match’: Detection, Deception, and Migrant Illegality in the India-Bangladesh Borderlands,” *American Anthropologist* 121, no. 4 (2019): 870–83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13313>.

<sup>41</sup> Maria Rashid, “Dying to Serve: Militarism, Affect, and the Politics of Sacrifice in the Pakistan Army,” in *Dying to Serve* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503611993>.

<sup>42</sup> Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of such ‘hollowing out’ processes and their impact on political systems, see Ayesha Siddiq, *Military Inc. – Second Edition: Inside Pakistan’s Military Economy*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 2017);

moniker for the military establishment's greater involvement in politics since 2017. The appeal of such hybridity is often framed as a best-of-both-worlds situation, where two different institutions can merge their interests and work together in the greater interest. The greater interest in the Pakistan context would be a stable political situation and, more importantly, a boost to a flagging economy within an expanding global system. Similarly, cultural products such as television serials produced by the military hope to achieve multiple objectives within a competitive market. However, mirroring the political situation in Pakistan, cultural productions such as drama serials face stagnation in the modern television system when one would expect them to progress. Ayesha Siddiq, talking about ISPR's role as one of intellectual control within the military-business ("milbus") nexus, says:

Despite the mirage of greater openness, the media is quite restricted in discussing matters of strategic importance or hugely deviate from the official narrative of the security establishment.<sup>44</sup>

This mirage of openness is reflected in the ISPR serials. In ISPR's attempt to capture imagination and attention in a frenetic media environment vying for eyeballs, they impose certain restrictions on the extent of civilian assertion within drama serials. However, that restricts the military itself in acting as anything other than an upstanding institution, sometimes to its own detriment. In this case of ISPR serials, the men of the army become what Marta Fliglerowicz describes as "flat protagonists":

These protagonists come ever closer to seeming, as Forster puts it, to be "constructed with a single idea or quality" of limited sophistication and interest. Their behaviors are increasingly stereotypical and predictable, and their means of responsiveness and expression progressively diminish, until other characters no longer even contradict, but simply disregard, what they say. At the same time, flat protagonists are also, against those odds, *protagonists*: they are consistently framed as major characters, and no other represented person usurps their place.<sup>45</sup>

For such protagonists, there is no growth, no challenge, no surprise that is dealt with other than the singular quality that defines these characters. For characters such as Major Usama in *Sinf-e-Aahan*, this will always be the idea of putting country and family above everything else, and they continue to deal with that world with such simplicity.

The second question posed is theoretical and proceeds directly from the first question, and that is the longevity of the hybridity of military and civil representations. On the one hand, such hybridity is desirable: it satisfies all stakeholders, or most of them, and achieves more for them than would be possible for each of the separated and distinct institutions. On the other hand, it creates

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and Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*, Cambridge South Asian Studies (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>44</sup> Ayesha Siddiq, "From Military Inc. to Media Inc.," in *Military Inc. - Second Edition, Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, 2nd ed. (Pluto Press, 2017), 326.

<sup>45</sup> Marta Fliglerowicz, *Flat Protagonists: A Theory of Novel Character* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190496760.001.0001>.

restrictions that prevent evolution and adaptation, both for the institutions and the people involved in hybrid situations. This makes hybridity particularly susceptible to exogenous events and unstable situations. It is important to note that hybridity is different from synthesis or integration; institutions still maintain their own realities independent of the other.

This analysis does not deal with the changes that happened after 9 May 2023, since the events of that day have transpired in institutional political changes that fundamentally rewrite the contract between the civil and military spheres. With the military establishment determining the course of Pakistan's political future, it is not certain at this moment in time how ISPR productions will change in this new environment. That will depend on whom the ISPR chooses to tell the stories of soldiers on screen and whether ISPR asks creators to embed military characters further in the civil sphere in terms of representation or break off to go back into the barracks. However, this new era draws attention to the problem of hybridity and its longevity. As creative teams start unraveling from the creative control exerted by the military, stories and characters will start exploration and evolution, breaking away from the shackles of hybrid representations. Whether the military would continue to produce such content in the same fashion is one question for the future. However, it already creates complications with the status quo of military-sponsored content, thus making the fragility of hybridity visible to audiences, creatives, and observers alike.

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