

IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN MEDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY, GENDER AND CULTURAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This study looks into how modern media acts as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), quietly influencing people think about national identity, gender roles, and cultural values. Based on Louis Althusser's theory and using qualitative content analysis, the research explores digital news websites, Pakistani TV dramas, movies, and ads to understand how media supports and reinforces dominant beliefs. The findings show that media doesn't just reflect existing ideas—it actively creates and spreads hegemonic narratives like nationalism, patriarchy, consumerism, and heteronormativity, often disguised as entertainment or news. Although there is some resistance in online spaces, most mainstream media supports the government and capitalist interests. This research adds to critical media studies by showing how ideology is built and maintained across different media formats and highlights the importance of critical media literacy in fighting against ideological control.

Keywords

Ideology, National Identity, Gender Representation, Ideological State Apparatus, Cultural Narratives

1. Introduction

In today's world, media has a major role beyond just sharing news. It also helps shape how people think about culture, beliefs, and what it means to be part of a group. Based on Louis Althusser's idea about the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), this research looks at how media quietly works to spread and keep certain ideas in place. Media doesn't just show the world as it is—it helps create and support the main ideas that are in power, often without people even realizing it. This is clear in the way national identity, how men and women are seen, and the values people are taught are shown in different types of media, like digital news, TV dramas, ads and movies.

This paper looks at how stories in the media help to make certain ideas seem normal and accepted. The study worked on messages that keep social systems in place and showed; the cultural products aren't neutral—they play a big part in supporting state, patriarchal, and capitalist ideas.

1.1 Problem Statement

Even though there are more media options than ever and they are easier to access, the main ideas behind the stories we see are still mostly untouched. Feelings of national pride, traditional ideas about men and women, and the belief in buying more things are constantly built into media content. These ideas help to support the powerful groups in society without people realizing it. There is a need to closely examine how these main ideas work, especially in places where the government's stories and cultural traditions are strongly connected to how the media operate.

This research looks at the gap in understanding how different types of mainstream and popular media help to make nationalism, gender roles, and cultural dominance seem normal.

It asks: How does a medium act as an instrument of ideas in forming views about national identity and how men and women should behave? By using Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus, this study aims to uncover the ways media keeps control over ideas and limits the opposing views.

1.2 Research Objectives

- To examine media portrayal on national identity, gender roles, and cultural values.
- To study TV dramas, movies, ads and digital news's dominant ideas to represent people and tell stories.
- To compare mainstream and alternative media portrayal in terms of ideology.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What ways do media content help to make dominant ideas about national identity, gender, and cultural values?
2. What are the main ideological stories that appear in Pakistani drama, movies, ads, and digital news sites?
3. How do different types of media supporting or maintaining ideological ideas?

1.4 Rationale of the Study

In today's world, where media is everywhere, it's more important than ever to question not just what media tells us, but how and why it presents certain ideas as natural, common, or unquestionable.

Even though digital media and the appearance of many voices have grown, dominant ideologies remain deeply rooted in what the public sees and consumes. These ideologies—such as nationalism, patriarchy, capitalism, or heteronormativity—continue to shape how people talk and act in society, often in small but influential ways. This study is based on the need to examine how media functions ideologically in daily life. Using Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus, the research aims to uncover the ways media institutions help to maintain existing power structures in society, often without using force.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is important because it shows the quiet but strong role media plays in shaping shared beliefs and supporting dominant ideas. In places where culture, politics, and media are closely linked—like in Pakistan—the ability of media to present made-up realities as normal and accepted is a key issue to explore. By applying Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus to modern media content, this research reveals how ideological control happens not through force, but through everyday cultural things like news, TV dramas, ads, movies and digital media news sites. This research is especially relevant in today's media-filled world, where people often just take in content without realizing the hidden messages it carries.

It helps us to understand how media supports the current system by normalizing ideas about national identity, gender roles and cultural narratives. It also provides a basis for critical media literacy, giving readers and scholars the tools to recognize, challenge, and question the ideologies hidden in media. By doing this, it encourages people to resist dominant ideas and create space for different and less common stories to be heard.

2.Literature Review

A number of researches on ideological state apparatus have already been done by the researcher with different perspectives. The previous researcher used different research methods like thematic analysis, content analysis, and discourse analysis while some of the researchers focused on impact of ISA.

Jamil (2021) examined the reinforcement of patriarchal ideology via the representation of gender roles in popular Pakistani television dramas. Using Althusser's media as an Ideological State Apparatus theory, the author posited that media serves to normative male dominance and female submissiveness, consistent with expectations in the family and wider society. Thematic analysis of specially chosen drama scripts and episodes was used, bringing out how plot trajectories consistently rewarded women's compliance and punished transgression. The writer successfully utilized Althusserian theory through their proof that TV entertainment insidiously reproduced the ideological state functions without express coercion. This was evidenced in repeated instances of female sacrifice, idealized motherhood, and demonization of women seeking autonomy or career aspirations. In this context, television was revealed to be important in naturalizing gendered power relations in Pakistani society. The relevance of the study was significant, particularly with the universal popularity and prevalence of such dramas across various socioeconomic strata. It presented a convincing argument for the manner in which media assisted in internalizing patriarchal norms in the guise of tradition and morality. The power of the study resided in its cultural specificity and close textual analysis of media narratives, successfully connecting them to societal beliefs and institution practices.

It only examined prime-time family dramas and did not look at other genres like comedy, news, or social media that might present other versions of gender. It also presumed a homogeneous audience reception without exploring how audiences received and possibly confronted these representations. Lacking audience-based data made it difficult to assert with certainty ideological internalization.

Future studies need to include audience reception studies, specifically along gender, age, and class lines, in order to gain a clearer understanding of the different levels of ideological acceptance or resistance. An examination of user-generated content or digital discourse on these dramas might also give insight into changing gender ideologies and the possibilities of counter-hegemonic narratives (Jamil,2021).

Alsultany (2023) mentioned in his research that western media propagated Islamo phobic tropes subtly yet systematically, situating Muslims as outsiders, threats, or necessarily violent. Through discourse analysis of mainstream news networks and mainstream cinema, the research revealed how such representations reinforced state ideologies of national security and Western dominance. The research showed how media not only served as a means of communication but also as an apparatus of ideological reproduction.

By calling on Althusser's theory, the research showed how media not only served as a means of communication but also as an apparatus of ideological reproduction. Islamo phobic discourses were not offered explicitly, but inscribed within common-place reporting and entertainment modes. The author further referred to Edward Said's theory of Orientalism in order to reinforce the point that Western media served as a cultural apparatus constructing public opinion through ideological encoding.

Nevertheless, the study was narrow in its range of diversity among its target audience. It was biased towards Anglo-American contexts and did not investigate Muslim audiences in the West in their reception of these representations or whether alternative media provided counter-narratives. Further, their generalization of "Western media" without segmentation between right-wing, centrist, or left-leaning outlets was a limitation.

Enli (2023) investigated how political campaigns employed Twitter to build and spread

ideological stories during elections. Applying the theory of Althusser's ideological apparatus, the author made the case that social media had become a digital ISA, where political agents coded ideological meanings through hashtags, slogans, and memes. The campaign tweets from various parties and public engagement metrics cross-checked were analyzed to determine ideological reach. The theory was well utilized, particularly in using campaign text to read as pre-encoded messages intended to influence voter awareness in a subtle fashion. The research demonstrated that political discourse on Twitter tended to cloak ideological prejudice in populist appeals, providing emotional anchorage while concealing elite agendas.

The strength of the study was its combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, which provided a strong framework for the assessment of ideological dissemination. It successfully employed Althusser's theory to criticize the manner in which the media's ideological role now extended to participatory platforms, demonstrating that digital engagement did not translate into ideological neutrality.

Gopal (2022) analyzed the ways in which Bollywood cinema reproduces colonial-era ideologies, such as modernist tropes, cultural superiority, and exoticism. The author posited that Bollywood tends to idealize Western notions and subvert indigenous practices and subaltern voices in veiled ways. The research was conducted on post-liberalization blockbusters and evaluated their thematic and visual presentation. By portraying Western ways of life as desirable and Indian customs as backward, media presupposed a value hierarchy that answered to elite and neoliberal agendas. The research was pertinent to understanding the part that cinema, as a postcolonial cultural product, contributes towards building national identity and aspirations of class in postcolonial nations. Nevertheless, the article did not have audience reception evidence to examine how various audiences make sense of such representations. It also overgeneralized the ideological direction of Bollywood without considering the diversity of the industry, particularly in regional films.

Sender (2022) examined how mainstream TV and cinema channels depicted LGBTQ+ characters and stories, employing Althusser's methodology of media as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). The author contended that although visibility was greater, it tended to be mediated through heteronormative and capitalist ideologies. Recent Netflix shows and high-profile ad campaigns were examined as case studies to uncover the ways queer identities were rendered consumable for the mainstream. The theory was used to demonstrate effectively that representation is insufficient to deconstruct dominant ideologies. Rather, the media complex tended to reinscribe capitalist or binary norms—representing LGBTQ+ identities in terms of consumption, beauty, or tragedy rather than overturning them. These coded narratives, which on the surface were progressive, tended to reinforce the very ideologies they claimed to disrupt.

Ahmad, (2024) gives representation of divorce on mainstay Pakistani television dramas and how it maps onto societal ideologies was explored. Drawing upon Althusser's concept of the media as an ISA, the author critically analyzed how divorce was constructed as a social taboo and individual failure, specifically for women. Divorced women were frequently constructed as outcasts or moral failures within the narratives, supporting patriarchal family values.

The theory was used to critique the way such representations served ideological control over women's autonomy. In melodrama and emotional appeal, dramas encoded traditional family units as the norm and deviation from them as disorder. This ideological message worked to ensure gender hierarchies and social conformity. The study's utility lay in the extensive viewing of TV dramas in Pakistan and the role of TV dramas in constructing social discourse. Its value was in its cultural particularity and close narrative analysis. It effectively demonstrated how even entertainment media acted as a moralizing agent in accord with conservative ideology.

Boykoff (2023) investigated framing of climate change by news media and corporate commercials and argued to play the role of serving neoliberal ideology by individualizing

responsibility and depoliticizing environmental crisis. The author investigated how media subtly changed emphasis away from systemic corporate responsibility towards consumer behavior and framing personal lifestyle choices as key to climate action. There was also no analysis of audience reception and how the viewer's negotiated or resists such dominant narratives.

Ross (2022) explored how mainstream Western media represented terrorism, with a focus on the case of attacks attributed to Muslim perpetrators, and how such representations reinforced ideological constructs of the 'Other.'the author illustrating how headlines, visual boundaries, and repetition of certain vocabularies (e.g., "Islamic terrorism") inscribed fear and fragmentation into public awareness. Media built Muslims as ideological menaces to Western liberalism through selective highlighting and erasure, hence warranting security policies and surveillance. The research's strength was in the critical discourse analysis of a variety of US, UK, and French media, which captured cross-cultural patterns of ideological reproduction. The research's relevance was self-evident in the context of post-9/11 global politics.

Teltumbde (2023) compared in his research "beauty advertisements on television and online media" and posited that they promoted Eurocentric and very narrow standards of beauty as a method of ideological control. Althusser's concept of media ISA was employed to illustrate how the media naturalized specific body shapes, skin colors, and gender presentations as attractive and hence created societal standards and consumption drives. The researcher indicates that the way advertising does not simply sell commodities but also ideological conceptualizations of identity, value, and femininity. By repetitive use of specific images and messages, media embedded a capitalist-patriarchal ideal of beauty into the public imagination. The research's strength lay in its application of both textual and semiotic analysis to uncover ideological messages in adverts from global brands. It had persuaded that beauty advertising reinforced capitalist forms by equating personal success and confidence with conformity and consumption.

Zia (2023) looked at the way state media in some Middle Eastern nation's disseminated religious ideology to justify political authority. The researcher contended that religious discourse in media was used as ideological means to justify authoritarian rule, quash opposition, and build moral cohesion. The analysis examined sermons on national television, religious television dramas, and state news channels. The power of the research was its empirical richness and regional specificity.

Boffone (2021) examined popular children's animated television shows and movies to uncover how early ideological socialization occurs through media. Employing Althusser's theory, the author contended that animation implanted capitalist, gendered, and nationalist ideologies as part of ostensibly innocuous entertainment. The research showed how elements of heroism, individualism, and meritocracy inscribed neoliberal and patriarchal ideologies. The research pointed out characters' gender roles, color coding, moral oppositions, and consumer brand placement as ideological tools.

Tiggemann (2022) explored how sports events internationally were reported in national media, highlighting how sports functioned as a means for ideological reinforcement of nationalism and militarism. Based on Althusser's media ISA theory, the author illustrated that sporting success was typically presented as symbolic victories of national supremacy, discipline, and unity. The research was based on reporting of the Olympics and cricket world cups in South Asian and Western media. Media framing, linguistic selection, and commentary tone were subject to content analysis to reveal encoded ideological messages.

Johnston & Swanson (2022) ventured into how dystopian television shows and movies reflect state surveillance and the ideological rationales for the same. Using Althusser's idea of the media as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), the writer theorized that these narratives tend

to be in a sense both critiquing and normalizing surveillance in the name of public security. The media plays the role of both a mirror and an exponent of state ideology by rendering control as something desirable. The theory was employed to explain the ways in which movies like "1984," "V for Vendetta," and "Black Mirror" embedded ideological messages regarding freedom, obedience, and fear. Surveillance was represented as ubiquitous and inescapable, subtly reinforcing actual attitudes towards state control in the era of data capitalism. The strength of the study was that it was able to correlate media theory with popular culture and actual political realities, specifically after 9/11. The study pointed out how entertainment can be used as a means of ideological conditioning despite seeming critical.

Farsakh (2023) centered on how social media algorithms tailor content that reaffirms ideological echo chambers as a cause of polarization. The study located social media platforms as ISAs that inscribe neoliberal values of engagement and profit, intermediately generating ideological rigidity.

The theory's application was persuasively argued, especially in the notion that algorithms, though appearing to be neutral, have ideological functions by favoring divisive and emotionally laden material. These mechanisms strengthen group identity and limit dissent exposure, aligning user behavior with platform interests.

The research of Hoodbhoy (2023) aligns the representation of mental health in online reporting and social guidance media with the argument that such representations tend to individualize blame and depoliticize institutional problems. The author made the following argument: media enforces neoliberalism by favoring individual resilience to collective care or structural change. The theory was well implemented to showcase how productivity, self-optimization, and personal failure narratives validate capitalist logic. Both corporate wellness marketing campaigns and mainstream mental health influencers who equate healing with consumption and individual action were criticized by the study.

Qiang (2022) examined how protest movements like Black Lives Matter or climate strikes were framed in mainstream news media. Employing Althusser's framework, the author demonstrated that media reports tended to delegitimize protest through emphasis on disruption, violence, or "lack of leadership," thus reinforcing the existing order. The theory was firmly grounded on the critique of media as an institution serving the state that constructs public comprehension of protest. With control over narrative, media encoded fear or suspicion of protest while legitimizing institutional politics.

Abidin (2022) examined the ways in which social class ideologies and consumerist values were reproduced by the Instagram influencers. The author contended that influencer culture was a dominant vehicle for capitalist ideology, inviting audiences to align happiness, success, and identity with material consumption and aesthetic presentation. Through analysis of influencer posts, captions, and patterns of engagement, the research demonstrated the ways in which aspirational lifestyles worked to legitimize class hierarchy. The study determined that the incessant reinforcement of luxury lifestyles and productivity culture quietly taught followers what to value and how to act, enacting personal worth in accordance with consumer capability.

2.1. Theoretical Framework:

The present research conducted on the basis of Ideological State Apparatus theory through which national identity, gender roles and cultural narratives analyzed by the researcher.

2.1.1 Media as an Apparatus of ideology;

The media as an apparatus of ideology theory posits that media is significant in reproducing and sustaining prevalent ideologies in society. Based on Marxist ideology, particularly Louis Althusser's ideas, this theory perceives media as an institution within the Ideological State Apparatus, whose role is to reproduce individuals' beliefs and values so they align with the

interests of the dominant class. In contrast to repressive institutions such as the army or police, media operates through consent by making certain concepts appear natural, normal, and universally held. It affects the way people view themselves, others, and the world and commonly supports social hierarchies based on class, gender, race, and power. Media promotes the stability of the current social structure through controlling narratives, framing problems in specific manners, and omitting other perspectives. It does this subtly, through entertainment, news, advertising, and cultural messages consistent with dominant ideologies. It emphasizes the significance of critically examining media content and recognizing its contribution to the production of ideology and public awareness (Althusser, 1971).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative content analysis to look into how media portraying content as an ideological tool in shaping narratives about national identity, cultural values and gender roles. It is based on Louis Althusser's idea of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), which helps us understand how media texts and images spread certain beliefs and values. The goal is to uncover the hidden messages that are included in the media content. It focused that how characters are portrayed, and the themes & storylines used.

3.2. Population of the Study

Population of the study is digital news websites, Pakistani TV dramas, Movies and ads.

3.3. Sampling Technique

The researcher used purposive sampling to gather data for qualitative content analysis that is most relevant to the research objectives of the study.

The sample includes:

1. Pakistani digital news site Daily Pakistan from January 2024 to December 2024 for the period of one year.
2. Pakistani TV drama Sinf-e-Aahan.
3. Pakistani Movie Bol.
4. Mainstream add of Shan Masalaa

3.4. Sample selection Criteria

- High reach or popularity,
- Cultural importance related to national identity or gender issues,
- Recent production or release (within the last 15 years),
- Clear or hidden discussions about identity, power, and social norms.

3.5. Major Themes

The major themes include;

- Nationalism,
- National identity
- Gender roles
- Cultural narratives

3.6. Content inclusion criteria

The news, script, dialogues, set design and story line related to nationalism, gender roles and cultural narratives considered as basic inclusion criteria of data for qualitative content analysis. Moreover gathered and analyzed on the basis of selected themes, inclusion criteria, conceptual and operational framework from the selected sample.

4. Analysis and Discussions

4.1. Data Analysis and Findings

This section shares the results from analyzing content across different types of media, including online news, Pakistani TV drama, movie and advertisements by Using theory of

Louis Althusser about media as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), the analysis shows common ways media supports and spreads dominant ideas about national identity, gender roles, consumer behavior, and cultural values.

4.1.1. Nationalism and Ideological Framing

Looking at headlines and images from Major Pakistani news site, a common theme is the use of nationalism, especially during conflicts, national celebrations, or political problems. News stories often set up simple contrasts like “patriots vs. traitors” or “us vs. them” to create a strong national identity that aligns with the government’s goals. The military is shown as a symbol of unity and power, while people who disagree, like protesters or critics, are ignored or labeled as threats.

Key Finding:

Nationalism is promoted through careful selection of news, the way language used, and the use of symbols is supported the government while keeping opposing ideas quiet.

4.1.2. Gender and Patriarchal Norms

Looking at Pakistani TV drama, there is a clear reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Female characters who act in a respectful, obedient way—like dutiful wives or sacrificing mothers—are shown positively. Women who want independence are often punished in the story (like being divorced, excluded, or seen as morally wrong). Male characters are shown as strong and rational, helping to create and accept gender-based hierarchies.

Key Finding:

Television dramas act as a way to normalize patriarchal values by presenting them as natural and unchangeable, using emotional and moral storytelling to discourage any challenges to these norms.

4.1.3. Consumerism and Class Ideology

Regular ads promote the idea that success and value are tied to material items, looks, and lifestyle branding. Products are shown as bringing happiness, confidence, and respect, especially for female.

Key Finding:

Media spreads capitalist ideas by making shopping look like the path to success, while hiding the social class divisions these messages support.

4.1.4. Cultural Superiority

Movie often shows a mix of old ideas and modern Western values. Characters, Local traditions, dialects and living patterns strengthen the cultural narratives. This mix helps to reinforce class and cultural hierarchies.

Key Finding:

Movie support the traditional and modern lifestyles and homogenies the voices of people from different social groups towards national culture.

4.2. Ideological Reproduction

Looking at all the media types, the study found three main ideas that are consistently reinforced:

- Nationalism: Viewing the nation as sacred and seeing disagreement as betrayal.
- Patriarchy: Promoting traditional family roles and strict gender rules.

- Capitalism: Linking a person’s worth to how much they buy and consume.

Even though the platforms are different—like TV, news, cinema, or social media—the messages they spread are similar, showing that media works together as part of an ideological system.

5. Conclusion and Discussion:

5.1. Discussion

This research showed that media isn’t just a way to share facts—it plays a role in controlling

society by promoting certain ideas. Using Althusser's ideas helps explain how media passes on values from the government, patriarchal systems, capitalism, and national pride. These messages are often hidden in things like repeated stories, character types, plotlines, and how emotions are shown. At the same time, its detailed analysis is useful, but future work should also look at how people actively respond to media. By examining digital news outlet, Pakistani television drama, movie and advertising, the study shows that media not only reflects societal norms but also plays a key role in shaping and reinforcing ideological narratives that align with the interests of the dominant class, state institutions and capitalist structures.

The findings also show that the portrayal of nationalism in news media often supports state-approved narratives that ignore dissent and create clear divisions between 'us' and 'them'.

Similarly, the depiction of gender in mainstream TV dramas promotes traditional roles and punishes those who deviate, especially women. Influencer culture and advertising further support capitalist values by linking personal success and identity to consumerism and looks. In entertainment media, especially movies, colonial and elitist ideas still persist under the idea of modernity and success, while even progressive portrayals like LGBTQ+ characters are often used in a way that fit into neoliberal and commercial systems.

5.2. Conclusion

This research has been explored that media functions as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), in which dominant ideologies are embedded within and spread through various forms of media. It further could be concluded that the media is not just a way to share information, but a tool for controlling ideas through consent, repetition, and normalization. The messages are often not questioned because they are part of familiar formats like family dramas, national celebrations, and inspiring ads. The main trend showed that the mainstream media, whether traditional or digital, continues to prioritize stable ideologies over open and critical views and promotes the nationalism, specify the gender roles and strengthen the cultural narratives.

By showing how ideology is built into daily media content, the study encourages educators, journalists, policymakers, and the public to rethink media's role—not just as a mirror of society, but as a powerful force in shaping its values, power relations, and shared beliefs.

5.3. Recommendations

There are some recommendations for further studies;

- Audience based survey could be done to check the effects of portrayed content related to ideology.
- A comparison of different cultures and media outlets may be done.
- Explore how factors like race, class, gender, and religion come together in media stories to support or oppose certain beliefs.
- Policy Linkage should be checked in future to connect media messages with government policies, especially when it comes to national pride or controlling information.

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