

HONOR-BASED VIOLENCE OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PAKISTANI MEDIA DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The research uses a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and feminist post-structuralist framework to discuss the ways in which media and legal discourses construct HBV. It looks into how these constructions affected the perception of the people, their policy, and justice to the victims. The researchers adopt a regional approach to the high-profile urban situations in Pakistan, caste-based violence in northern India, the institutionalization of women's eradication in Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, and the HBV endemic in Baluchistan under-reported. Honor-based violence (HBV) continues to be a prevalent type of gender-based violence in South Asia, where honor ideologies are used to perpetrate murder, rape, and torture against women. The socio-political and discursive processes that have been normalized, justified, or hidden to legitimize HBV in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan have been critically analyzed in this paper with special reference to the underreported and militarized Balochistan region. Although high-profile cases such as the killing of Qandeel Baloch (2016) and Noor Mukadam (2021) have been used to talk about them, hundreds are invisibilised every single day in Baluchistan in particular through collusion between the tribal systems and state ignorance. Examples of tribal justice and patriarchal dominance over the law of the state are incidents like the killing of five women in Kohlu (2022) or stoning a woman in Turbat (2023). The political violence, particularly of gender and political activism of Baloch women, which has been imposed on them, and the oppressive treatment of female students, is another manifestation of the specific gendered and political violence of the region. HBV is also perpetuated in India by means of caste and religious control, especially in such states as Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Khap panchayats, political silence, and cultural stigma facilitate a murder that is associated with so-called love jihad or caste transgressions.

Keywords: Honor-Based Violence, Gender and Violence, South Asia, Patriarchy, Media Framing, Women's Rights.

Introduction

Patriarchal systems that exist in South Asia tend to place the lives of women under thorough examination and domination. The most drastic impact of this is honor-based violence (HBV), in which the women suffer injury or even death by their relatives or the community due to perceived infraction in patriarchal codes of honor. Although it masquerades as tradition, HBV is, in essence, gendered violence with the victims being women trying to attain their independence, defy conservative cultural practices, or women accused of flaunting social conventions. Although HBV is a global disease, it is acutely common in certain regions of Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan, where conservative culture, poor enforcement of the law, and politicized religious or tribal

systems. The reestablishment of the Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2021 reduced women's rights severely, increased honor killings, domestic violence, and tribal justice, with almost complete media coverage. It is a qualitative research based on 2015-2024 qualitative data of media analysis with the help of Critical Discourse Analysis and a feminist poststructuralist approach. It demonstrates systematic tendencies of victim-blaming, euphemism, cultural defense, and institutional silence, which depoliticize HBV and support texts of patriarchy. The article proposes the shift in paradigm to a rights-based, justice-focused approach based on intersectional feminism, grassroots activism, and ethical journalism. It ends by giving policy recommendations to fight gender-based impunity and guaranteeing security, dignity, and independence of women in South Asia (Ramzan & Javaid, 2025).

Honor-based violence HBV is a variety of violent acts, such as murder, acid attacks, forced marriage, confinement, and mutilation of people accused of betraying the patriarchal honor codes of their family. Most of these attacks are often instigated by actions that are considered shameful, like the selection of a partner, refusal of an arranged marriage, desire to divorce, use of social media, and wearing immodest clothes, or even falling prey to rape. Though in some cases men are also the victims, especially in inter-caste or interfaith marriages, women form the vast majority of the victims. Notably, HBV is a religious issue with no foundations on religion, but it appears in all Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh societies. It serves as a form of societal control, which is exercised by men and women alike to support the old-fashioned patriarchies.

Nevertheless, honor-based violence (HBV) has still been taking hundreds of lives every year in Pakistan despite the changes in laws. High profiles disclose social predicaments. The national outrage was triggered by the murder of a young Noor Mukadam, who came into the world in an affluent family in 2021. Nevertheless, much of the public discussion that then followed was aimed at accusing her character and her way of life, and not the crime itself. In the same manner, the 2016 honor killing of social media personality Qandeel Baloch by her brother made people aware of the high stakes for women who break social conventions. The case that she was involved in also revealed some vital legal loopholes that included the fact that the perpetrators could seek forgiveness from the family members in order to avoid being punished. The 2016 Criminal Law Amendment attempted to seal this loophole; however, has poor enforcement. Cultural justifications in the courts, lack of protection of witnesses, and condoning extra-legal tribal councils (Jirgas) that condone violence, especially in rural settings, further perpetuate HBV.

Balochistan is among the most underrepresented provinces in Pakistan, which is experiencing little media coverage, state protection, and civil advocacy. Political insurrections, high military presence, and a strict tribal culture severely limiting the freedom of women, movement, and visibility characterize the area and make it a hotspot of honor-based violence. According to one case in Kohlu (2022), five women were killed by their relatives after a video was shared of women applauding a wedding- an activity believed to be disrespectful. In a different example in Turbat (2023), tribal leaders had a woman accused of adultery publicly stoned to death without any intervention of the state. There is a low coverage of such crimes by the national media and they are seldom investigated. Alongside forced disappearances of Baloch women activists, including Karima Baloch, found dead in a suspicious manner in Canada in 2020, the politicization of the female body in the context of more general ethnic and military struggles is also a matter of concern. Baloch women have to deal with both political and ethnic as well as gender-based violence, which is propagated in an atmosphere of impunity perpetuated by families, the state, and armed actors

(Ramzan & Khan, 2024)

Literature Review

Honor-based violence (HBV) is a widespread sociocultural issue in the patriarchal culture of South Asian countries, “in which women are victims of supposed transgressions against modesty, marriage, or obedience” (Gill, 2009; Idriss, 2017). Other scholars like Sen (2005) highlight the intersection of caste and class with patriarchy to regulate female bodies and decisions, especially in rural and tribal settings. “Media and state institutions tend to portray honor killings in Pakistan as personal tragedies and not crimes per se, with culturally suggestive words such as Ghairat (honor) that make female actions dependent on the male honor” (Zia, 2009; Shah, 2016). “The Khap Panchayat is a form of extrajudicial bodies that practice caste endogamy using violence and social ostracization in India” (Chowdhry, 2007). Feminist legal thinkers blame the state for the inability to question such practices or save women against the pressure of the community (Agnes, 1999; Menon, 2004). In like manner, “in the Taliban-run Afghanistan, inflexible translations of the Sharia law methodically obliterate the rights of women and permit HBV” (Kandiyoti, 2007).

Media discourse tends to make an individual case of HBV sensational without considering the systemic reasons (Fair, 2010; Banerjee, 2012). The application of feminist critical discourse analysis shows how the news media perpetuate patriarchal binaries -either women as victims who need protection or deviants who deserve punishment (Lazar, 2005). There is no comparing, cross-border discourse study of HBV in South Asia, especially in marginalized areas such as Baluchistan that is available in the literature. This gap is filled in this paper through the application of a critical discourse analysis to identify the ways in which media and legal discourse in South Asia reproduce ideologies that legitimize violence in the name of honor (Bhutto & Ramzan, 2021)

Rationale and Research Objectives

Although honor-based violence (HBV) is rampant, the discourse-based studies done on the factors that reinforce its patriarchal foundations are limited. The majority of the existing studies emphasize the sociological dimension and overlook the way in which the discourses about HBV are produced, justified, and propagated in the mass mind.

- To compare discursive practices of the media and law that naturalize HBV
- To analyze the victim-blame, euphemism, and cultural justification institutionalization
- To emphasize those areas that are underreported, such as Baluchistan and Taliban dominated Afghanistan, where governments and tribal authorities cooperate to oppress women
- To provide a comparative study of HBV discourses in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan
- To promulgate a feminist, rights-based strategy of fighting HBV

Research Questions:

1. What is the role played by linguistic and visual media images in constructing HBV in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan?
2. In what ways do these discourses differ in terms of nationality, geography, and culture e.g., Baluchistan, villages under Khap influence, regions of Taliban control?
3. In what ways is the HBV patriarchal ideology reproduced, hidden, or challenged by media discourse?

Theoretical Framework

This research uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), informed by the work of Fairclough, van Dijk, and Wodak, to discuss the intersection of language and power and ideology in the media coverage of honor-based violence (HBV). CDA considers discourse to be a kind of social practice, reflecting and reinforcing power relations, which is why it is an appropriate approach to the analysis of the discursive normalization or challenge of HBV. The unpackaged media strategies of polarizing in-groups and out-groups to use van Dijk's concept of the ideological square to justify women who do not conform to being punished. The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) by Wodak allows putting these representations in a particular socio-historical context, e.g., colonial legacies, tribal governance, and local power structures in territories such as Baluchistan, rural North India, and Afghanistan. Feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005) is also considered in the study in order to explore how language recreates patriarchal ideologies- one of such is the use of lexical choice that either implicates or absolves victims. Also, the postcolonial feminist approach (Mohanty, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2013) offers a critical perspective to the Western-focused understandings of HBV and the necessity of considerations of agency and contextualized analyses (Nawaz et al., 2022).. This study provides an intersectional approach to gendered violence and hierarchies perpetuated in South Asia by using CDA with feminist and postcolonial theories (Nawaz et al., 2021).

Methodology

The research proposal follows a qualitative research design that uses the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA) as the basis to examine the media production of honor-based violence (HBV) in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. According to Fairclough (1995) and Wodak (2001), CDA sees discourse as a social practice that gives rise to and reflects on power relations, and FPDA (Baxter, 2003) focuses on the positioning of gendered subjectivities in morality, culture, tradition, and law discourse. Combined, these strategies allow a critical intervention on apparent and unspoken structures that create societal and media representations of HBV.

The study data has included 60 purposely sampled news articles (20 articles on Pakistan, 20 on India, and 20 on Afghanistan), published in 2016-2024 in major English-language newspapers, such as Dawn, The Hindu, and Tolo News, as well as in international sources, such as BBC and Al Jazeera. It covers both high-profile cases and minor cases of HBV, including the murder of Noor Mukadam and Qandeel Baloch, the Turbat stoning, rulings of Khap Panchayat, hate crimes associated with love jihad, and punishments during the Taliban rule. Besides reports, op-eds, editorials, headlines, and captions were also gathered in order to capture a wider frame. The ideological relevance, distribution, and depiction of the urban, rural, and underreported areas like Baluchistan and tribal Afghanistan were used as the criterion for text selection. Some of the keywords were honor killings, family honour, tribal justice, Taliban women, among others. Data were organized, and then the data were coded using NVivo 14. It was analyzed at three levels, namely textual analysis of lexical usage (e.g., shame, illicit), syntactic patterns (e.g., passive voice in headlines), and attribution (whose voices are prioritized or marginalized); meso-analysis of discursive practices (e.g., editorial ideologies, news values, dominant narrative frames, e.g., crime of passion, family feud); and macro-analysis of discursive practices in terms of which HBV is justified, silenced, or contested (e.g., patriarchy, nationalism, religious

Considering that it is a sensitive topic, the study adheres to the feminist ethic of care, where the dignity of the victims is not undermined, and the representation does not re-victimize the subjects.

Since the research is based on publicly accessible sources in the English language, it acknowledges the restriction of vernacular discourses. Overall, the research approach combines both discourse-analytic rigor and feminist morale to reveal the processes of creating, normalizing, or debunking HBV in South Asia through media discourses. It does not only look at what is said, but how, by whom, and to their benefit, thus highlighting the power relations behind gendered violence and its presentation.

Analysis

This research determines the recurring patterns of discursiveness in how honor-based violence (HBV) is framed using the three-dimensional approach of Fairclough and the feminist poststructuralist approach of Baxter based on the analysis of 60 media articles of Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan.

Textual Analysis (Micro-Level Discourse Features)

The media in all three countries exhibited certain dramatic tendencies in the patterns of the words employed, in the order of the elements of the syntax, and in the mode of representation.

Framing Lexical Text and Gender Language

A lexicon of moralizing was continually used in media coverage in all three countries, and all were based on the use of shame, dishonor, and transgression. Words like immoral, disobedient, provoked, and illicit were commonly employed and implicitly used to hold female victims of the violence they experienced.

- The murder of Qandeel Baloch in Pakistan (Dawn) was presented as an attempt by her brother to wash the family disgrace.
- A Bhopal Khap Panchayat in India (The Hindu) was quoted as saying that a woman had violated caste boundaries.
- According to the Afghan media (Tolo News), floggings were punishments against the society norms or against failure to adhere to moral codes.

This kind of language was systematic in putting responsibility on victims, thus reiterating patriarchal rules and allowing violence in the name of honor maintenance.

Syntactic Structures and Passive Voice

One issue that was clear was the use of passive voice in the headlines and leads that had the effect of obscuring agency and depersonalizing violence. Examples include:

- In the name of honor, murdered (Express Tribune, Pakistan).
- Couple murdered for love marriage (Times of India).
- BBC, Girl stoned in Taliban region.

This figurative decision put forward the crimes as depersonalized occurrences and not willful ones. When perpetrators were named, there was a tendency to use a mitigating word such as disturbed or pressured to again evade responsibility.

Attribution and Source Quotation

Media coverage often gave priority to the opinions of the male authority figures- police, community elders, or family members over the voices of the victims or their exclusion. Indian and Afghan coverage would frequently show the sexist utterances of judicial authorities or other elders, neutrally, which made them sound legit. For instance:

- In the Indian Express, one of the elders of the Khap Panchayat was quoted as saying she had been warned on several occasions.
- One of the tribal elders informed Pajhwok News: That is how we do it, it is in our traditions.

Victim narratives, when they were present, were frequently mediated by third-person narrations, which distorted and silenced women themselves. Such a trend strengthened the structural prejudices and legitimized the gender-based violence in the name of tradition or authority.

Discursive Practice Level (Macro-Level Production and Circulation)

At the discursive practice level, the articles unveil how HBV narratives are discursively enshrined in the media institutions in terms of editorial policies, choice of their sources, and priorities of the events.

Framing Devices and News Values

The HBV media coverage was based heavily on sensational crime-reporting norms, with the use of such terms as gruesome, mystery, or horror, in instances of Pakistani and Afghan media. This language made the violence personalized and made it appear like an isolated case as opposed to a systemic problem. Although a few editorials in such publications as Dawn or The Hindu linked HBV with larger patriarchal systems, most of the news concerned only episodic, incidences-driven narration, without a structural critique.

Event Selection and Case Hierarchies

High-profile cases, such as the murder of Noor Mukadam, received more coverage, while the case of the Rohtak sisters received much less attention, whereas much less attention was given to cases in rural or tribal parts of the country, such as Baluchistan, Uttar Pradesh, or Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban. Such an order of visibility tended to take into consideration the social position of victims, their geographic location, or their exposure to the media.

Visual Representation and Image Captioning

The visual representation also left the victims marginalized: the photos were devoted to dead male family members, crime scenes, or anonymous women (e.g., wearing burqas), which emphasizes their invisibility. Captions were written using dehumanizing terms such as, unmarried woman murdered or body found, putting victims into the status of objects and hiding the systemic reasons.

Social Practice Level (Macro-Level Ideological Structures)

At the social practice level, HBV is entrenched in more general social ideologies of patriarchy, nation, religion, and tribal honor.

Patriarchy and Political Control

Media discourses, as seen across the three countries, portrayed female behavior as something that was socially controlled, with HBV being used as a tool to bolster the male authority. The patriarchal ideologies were reflected in the respecting of the family or community honor rather than the independence of women, especially in rural Pakistan and India, which are dominated by caste and tribal identities.

For instance:

- According to the Indian Express, members of the Khap group said that no girl can get married without the permission of elders.
- As Tolo News reported, one father defended his decision to kill his daughter by the fact that it was the will of God.

No one rarely questioned such statements in the articles themselves. Counter-narratives were usually based on outside sources such as non-governmental organizations or United Nations agencies, not on the foundation of the main reporting.

Religious and Tribal Legitimization

In Afghanistan, specifically in the Taliban regime, HBV was often justified in religious or tribal

terms. The media has been using Shariah blindly to publicize the punitive actions against women who have been accused of committing immoral acts. Likewise, Jirgas (tribal councils) in Baluchistan were described as traditional systems of justice, although they imposed HBV by so-called customary systems.

Nationalist Discourses and Cultural Essentialism

The relationships between people of different castes or different religions were frequently presented as the inter-caste or inter-faith love jihad in India, particularly in the discourse of the right-wing. This type of nationalist essentialism has framed HBV as a sense of patriotic preservation, demonizing victims and associating violence with nationalistic preservationism.

Comparative Reflections across Countries

Although the fundamental patriarchal theories that HBV is based on are universal, the media portrayal of these theories differs widely in national settings:

1. **Pakistan:** It is frequently covered using a criminal justice framework, with publications such as Dawn sometimes giving progressive commentary on it, even of tribal jirgas.
2. **India:** The country has ideologically split reporting (e.g., The Hindu), which is able to speak about structural problems; conservative media outlets tend to defend HBV as a cultural continuation.
3. **Afghanistan:** There is state control and security restriction of the news, whereby Taliban-controlled media announce the usage of religious or traditionalist reasons of violence with openness.

Key Themes Emerging from the Analysis

- **Normalization of Male Violence:** The offenders are anonymized and minimized by the use of passive language, which makes them less accountable.
- **Silencing of Victims:** Direct quotes or the point of view of female victims are omitted on a regular basis, which contributes to their voicelessness.
- **Moralizing Framing:** Women are portrayed as deviantizing the actions and putting the blame on the people who commit the deeds, as the victims.
- **Selective Visibility:** Urban high-profile cases are widely covered, and victims of marginalization or the rural setting are hidden.
- **Cultural Justification:** HBV tends to get away with it because it is called tradition or culture, which is not subject to critical analysis, but hides the oppressive system.

Discussion

Honor-based violence (HBV) is a form of violence in India that may largely be based on caste hierarchy, especially when women marry out of caste/religion. Threats or death decrees against interfaith or inter-caste couples are often given by khap panchayats, which are informal village councils in Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. The most vivid illustration is the case of Rohtak in 2019, when two sisters were killed by an uncle because they married Dalit men, which demonstrates the combination of caste dominance and gendered violence. Likewise, the politically charged conspiracy theory of Love Jihad, which alleges that Muslim men are pressuring the Hindu women into converting and marrying them, has led to honor killings. These crimes are frequently mystified by the Indian media as being family matters or love stories gone awry, and they fail to realize the structural casteism and patriarchy that provide the opportunity. Although it is against the law in the Indian Penal Code, there is no specific law against honor killings, and thus, the conviction is weak, and impunity is perpetuated.

With the Taliban once again gaining power in 2021, Afghan women have experienced a severe backlash of their civil rights. Tribally rooted and extremist interpretations of Sharia, honor-based violence (HBV) have gone on the rise. Women and girls are now being systematically deprived of education, child marriage, publicly flogged or executed as so-called moral offenders. Although honor killings are not new and have been executed since time immemorial through the family, the Taliban is also involved in enforcing punitive measures publicly against victims of alleged adultery or elopement. These activities are conducted without any scrutiny, and the lack of accountability is created by media censorship and the breakdown of the judicial system to facilitate the spread of HBV unchecked.

Good legislation to tackle honor-based violence (HBV) requires social dialogue. The manner in which media, courts, and politicians discuss HBV is what determines how society views the victims and the severity of the offense. The very definition of such a phenomenon as honor killing is a legitimizing force to violence, whereas the idea that the press reports about the behavior of the victim, and not the sadism of the killer, affirms patriarchal standards. In this paper, it is argued that HBV cannot be viewed as isolated crimes; however, it is a discourse that helps to perpetuate the power structure. Through a linguistic, symbolic, and silence analysis of the media, this work uncovers how the notion of honor can be used to defend tyranny and how the society remains complicit and silent through rhetorical avoidance and silence.

Conclusion

The paper has used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (FPDA) to analyze the discursive constructions of honor-based violence (HBV) in the Pakistani, Indian, and Afghan media. The review of 60 articles has shown that HBV is always normalized with the help of sociocultural, religious, and political ideologies that support patriarchal power and support gendered violence. The news outlets in all three nations hyped individual instances but did not criticize the system. Cases like the murder of Qandeel Baloch, Noor Mukadam, and Karima Baloch were packaged in a moral deviance to justify male violence through the use of words like shame, illicit, and family honor to indirectly victimize the victims.

Cultural and religious nationalism was frequently used in discourses about Khap Panchayats, "love jihad," and caste-based HBV in India in attempts to justify violence, and to render Dalit and tribal women invisible. International media in Afghanistan, which was controlled by the Taliban, also emphasized human rights violations, but occasionally based on the orientalist accounts, and did not take into account local opposition and the complexity of the situation. This paper, by the multi-level analysis, shows that HBV is not only a personal or a cultural phenomenon, but a discourse that is reproduced due to the forces of media, ideological bias, and institutional silence. Lack of survivor voice and critical feminist standpoints also support the narratives of hegemony. Although this study lacks diversity in its coverage of the English-language media, the findings indicate that there is an urgent necessity for ethical journalism, structural legal changes, and engagement of the grassroots feminist movements in combating the patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate honor-based violence. Such discourses should be deconstructed in order to promote gender justice in South Asia.

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