

TRACING FEMINIST DISCOURSES IN PAKISTANI TELEVISION DRAMAS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF AAKHIR KAB TAK AND NANHI

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Abstract

This paper explores feminist discourses of two Pakistani TV dramas (Aakhir Kab Tak and Nanhi) through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Television dramas are effective cultural texts, which influence the social roles, morality, and gender as perceived by the people. Although this type of drama often predicts the sufferings, resilience, and social conflicts of women, the processes according to which the feminist meanings are formulated are still understudied. This paper will look at the discursive articulation of feminist themes, how patriarchal gender ideologies are stabilized, challenged or negotiated, and that dialogue, characterization, and narrative framing are part of the ideological meaning-making. The results suggest that the two dramas bargain the tension between empowerment and patriarchal restrictions as the gender representation in the Pakistani media is complex. This paper has added to feminist media studies and discourse analysis through the revelation of the interaction between language, ideology, and representation in television drama.

Keywords: *Feminist discourse, Pakistani television, Critical Discourse Analysis, media representation, gender ideology*

Introduction

TV dramas are one of the most popular cultural products in Pakistan, which influence the social perception of gender, morals and social roles. In addition to being entertaining, they serve as socio-cultural texts, spreading and naturalizing hegemonic ideological presumptions regarding the place of women, the pattern of their behavior, and their agency (Abbas, 2018; Tariq & Husnain, 2025). Such productions tend to mirror and support the expectations of society in that they show gendered narratives that inform the masses on what is acceptable femininity, domesticity, and social behaviour. The portrayal of women in Pakistani television in the recent years has received a growing academic interest, especially in relation to domestic violence, social susceptibility, agency, and resistance. Although there are also acts of female empowerment, most of the dramas still reproduce the traditional gender hierarchies through the dialogue, characterization, and framing of narratives (Ahmed & Wahab, 2019). Women are often presented as ethical guardians, nurturers or victims whose lives and decisions are highly controlled by social and family institutions. At the same time, modern drama at times breaks these conventions and portrays women as self-assertive, rebellious, and negotiating patriarchal restrictions. This subordination and empowerment is what makes Pakistani television dramas such important places where the feminist discourse may be analyzed and the ideological mechanisms that generate, reproduce, or challenge gendered social norms may be analysed (Chaudhry et al., 2021). The Pakistani television dramas, which are being discussed within the frame of the current study, are Aakhir Kab Tak (Geo TV) and Nanhi (Hum TV). The Aakhir Kab Tak is a premonition on women oppressing verbal, matrimonial and sexual mistreatment in the intimate and societal spheres underlining the structural and interpersonal mechanisms of the patriarchal domination. Nanhi is however more centered on vulnerability and exploitation of young girls and the author demonstrates how social structures, family influences, and gender

expectations inhibit the agency of women. The two plays are rich to learn how the feminist meanings are discursively produced and negotiated in the Pakistani media discourse not only in a direct theme but also in the language and narrative devices, and between characters.

Problem Statement

Despite the fact that the Pakistani television dramas often predetermine the suffering, strength, and struggles of women, the discursive processes according to which the feminist meanings are produced are under-researched. They have received little or no research in previous works on the use of dialogue, narrative placement, and linguistic strategy in the building of feminist discourse in these plays despite their emphasis on thematic representation, characterization, or social impact (Ahmed & Wahab, 2019; Chaudhry et al., 2021). This is especially a critical gap in Pakistan whereby media discourse can be seen as progressive and at the same time, perpetuate patriarchal ideologies. As a result, the feminist representation in television dramas tends to be an arguably negotiated, ideologically negotiated, and contradictory one. Women can be seen to be empowered, but their independence and expression can still be limited by their family, society, or even morality. This gap is bridged in the current study by analyzing production of feminist discourses and reproduction, resistance, or renegotiation of patriarchal ideologies in *Aakhir Kab Tak* and *Nanhi* to give a subtle insight into the interplay between media, ideology, and gender.

Research Objectives

- To identify discursive construction of feminist themes in *Aakhir Kab Tak* and *Nanhi*.
- To investigate patriarchal gender ideologies through reinforcement, resistance, or renegotiation in *Aakhir Kab Tak* and *Nanhi*

Research Questions

- How are feminist themes discursively made in *Aakhir Kab Tak* and *Nanhi*?
- How do *Aakhir Kab Tak* and *Nanhi* support, oppose or renegotiate patriarchal gender ideologies?

Rationale of the Study

The study has both academic and social contributions. It contributes to the advancement of feminist media studies, discourse analysis and Pakistani cultural studies through the analysis of television dramas as ideological texts and not as entertainment. Through the use of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) the study will look at the linguistic, narrative, and interactional practices that generate, negotiate or challenge the norms of patriarchy. On a methodological level, the approach makes it possible to systematically investigate the way language constructs social reality and creates gender identities. On the social level, the research will shed light on how recurrent representations of women in the popular media can shape how people perceive agency, rights and social conduct (Tariq & Husnain, 2025). Pakistani TV dramas are watched by millions of people, and it becomes a key to influencing the cultural standards of femininity, moral behavior, and social responsible behavior. The selection of performed plays of leading T.V. stations offers a contextual and analytically manageable corpus to this study, which means that the results will be applicable to the current discussions of gender, media representation, and feminist discussion in South Asia.

Literature Review

Studies on Pakistani television dramas highlight their strong influence as a culture text shaping and mirroring social ideologies of gender roles, ideology and power relationships. Although television is commonly viewed as entertainment, researchers believe that the narratives of drama engage in the process of creating and spreading social norms related to femininity and masculinity in both explicit and implicit discourse patterns (Ghaffar et al., 2025; Chaudhry et al., 2021). A number of works have identified the continuation of old stereotypes of gender in Pakistani TV plays. Tariq and Husnain (2025) discovered that female characters in *Sar e Rah* and *Durr e Shehwar* often affirm such traditional roles as domesticity, dependence, and self sacrifice, and that the representation of female characters in the media supports traditional cultural norms as opposed to challenging them. These tendencies indicate that conventional gender norms are still embedded in the mainstream media images.

In the same vein, Kiani et al, (2023) posit that despite the fact that the dramas occasionally portray empowered women, they are usually superficial and do not change the ideologies of dominant genders significantly. Their analysis of the content of recent shows reveals how narratives tend to restrict women to family centric roles and support the patriarchal expectations even though it makes some nods towards autonomy. Evidence of identity building in research also attests to these findings. Khan et al, (2025) examined the use of characters in popular dramas like *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* and *Hamsafar* and demonstrated that stereotypical expressions of women continue to be so as to be consistent with the general social notions of gender roles and identity.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been used more and more by scholars to reveal the way in which language and narrative practices reproduce or negotiate patriarchal ideologies. One of such studies was carried out by Chaudhry et al. (2021), who used the Fairclough model to examine the discourse of such dramas as *Cheekh* and *Khaani* and found that despite the apparent assertiveness of female characters, the discourse tends to restore the male established social norms and hierarchies. In line with this, Ghaffar et al. (2025) applied the feminist CDA to prime time serials and concluded that linguistic and semiotic devices in discourse and narrative format give preference to male authority, women are sacrificial or obedient, and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity in television narratives.

Like Azam et al. (2024), *Sar e Rah* portrayals are also deconstructed, showing how the gender stereotypes and the patriarchal norms are perpetuated through discursive practices, which legitimize the roles of wife, mother, or domestic figure to the characters, and punish the deviations against these roles.

Though a lot of research has emphasized on reproduction of ideology, there is an emerging literature on how Pakistani dramas occasionally challenge the gender roles of traditional gender roles. In a comparative feminist textual analysis of *Inkaar* and *Tere Bin*, Jamshaid (2025) revealed that *Inkaar* especially contests the traditional role by foreshadowing the female opposition to sexual harassment and victimization, although other films are limited to the purview of romance or family values.

In line with this, Raza, Ameen, and Hani (2025) analyzed how feminism is portrayed in mainstream serials and found out that it is characterized by acceptance and resistance to the patrilineal expectations although their agency is often bound at the same time by the culture.

Longitudinal studies indicate that gender representation in Pakistani TV has changed over the years though not necessarily in direct directions. The authors discovered that the figures have changed and are no longer confined to domestic roles but have adopted the hybrid

forms of the same, incorporating a degree of autonomy with the traditional requirement, which is an indication of greater ideological change in the society despite the preservation of patriarchal norms (Anwar, Rani, and Butt, 2025).

Audience reception studies are useful to content based analysis as they demonstrate the interpretation of the gendered representations by viewers. Tahir (2021) reported that non stereotypical depiction of gender role could positively affect the perception of agency and social identity in female viewers, which implies that television drama can make the audience believe in gender norms off-screen.

Summary of Gaps

Although literature on gender representation in Pakistani television dramas has been growing, there are still a number of gaps. To begin with, most of the existing studies point out to the existence of stereotypes and thematic patterns, but few offer systematic studies on the discursive mechanisms i.e. how language and narrative building operate to reproduce or challenge ideologies. Second, there has been very little comparative research in CDA on the topic of the negotiation of feminist discourses in various dramas and television networks. Lastly, despite the issues of resistance and empowerment being covered, there is a necessity to further analyze the ways in which these concepts are achieved at the linguistic and interactional levels within the textual structure of particular plays.

Research Design

The research design used in this study is a qualitative research design where Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the methodology used in the research to analyze the creation of feminist discourses in Pakistani television dramas. The use of CDA in this study is justified by the fact that this method will enable the researcher to examine how language and dialogue and narrative strategies create, support, or challenge social ideologies, such as gender hierarchies and feminist meanings (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak and Meyer, 2015).

It is an interpretive and exploratory study which refers to the manner in which a patriarchal and feminist discourse is enacted in a televised narrative. Such a method helps to understand the interaction of media content, ideological structures and social meaning-making in a subtle way.

Data Corpus

The corpus of data will include two Pakistani finished television dramas, *Aakhir Kab Tak* (Geo TV) and *Nanhi* (Hum TV). The following criteria were used in the choice of these dramas:

Completion Status: Both plays are no longer on air and one can watch entire episodes and plot lines.

Relevance: The plays anticipate the female experience that not only bring out domestic abuse, gender vulnerability and resistance as an issue but also presents a comprehensive corpus through which we can study the topic of feminist discourses.

Channel Diversity: The inclusion of one drama of a major private channel (Geo TV) and one of Hum TV should guarantee the presence in the mainstream media.

There were 40 episodes (20 each of both dramas) that were analyzed. The selection of episodes was also done in a purposeful manner as it encompassed crucial plot lines and scenes where gender, power, and agency issues are brought to the forefront.

Data Collection

Episode transcription was used to gather data; the emphasis was on dialogues, monologues, interactions, and commentary on the story. The procedures of transcription were based on verbatim transcription regulations whereby the linguistic and paralinguistic characteristics were recorded, including tone, pauses, and emphasis (Gee, 2014). The depiction of the fight of female characters, their empowerment or the negotiation of social norms were prioritized. Also, secondary sources were used, such as episode summaries, scripts (where possible) and web commentary to place the discussions into context and to check them against their thematic correctness. This triangulation increases the credibility and reliability of the data analysis (Patton, 2015).

Analytical Framework

The paper applies the three-dimensional model of CDA suggested by Fairclough (1995, 2015), which considers the discourse on three levels:

1. **Textual Analysis:** Centres on the use of lexical, syntax, metaphors, modality and pronouns to determine how language creates feminist and patriarchal meanings. Indicatively, the study looks at the deployment of words that are associated with either obedience, autonomy, victimization or empowerment.
2. **Discursive Practice:** Analyzes Production, distribution and consumption of the text, with regard to the way dialogues are structured and how the social interactions between characters are indicative of larger social ideologies.
3. **Social Practice:** Explores the interrelations between discourses in dramas and the social organization, cultural practices, and gender ideologies. The dimension will look at the ways in which televised images of women support, oppose or renegotiate the patriarchal rules in Pakistani society.

The analysis is done through coding and categorization of repetitive discursive patterns, and further thematically through interpretive analysis to come up with a full picture of feminist discourse (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis consists of:

Character dialogue: Speech acts of main and supporting female characters, both verbal displays of resistance, compliance, or agency.

Narrative commentary: Narrative elements, such as statements of the narrator and framing of the plot.

Interactional sequences: Dialogues between the male and female characters with a focus on the power imbalance and gender roles bargaining.

The multi-layered method is conducive to a systematic analysis of the relationship between feminist and patriarchal discourses, the way these two are interlaced and manifested in the language and the structure of the narration.

Sampling Strategy

The sampling technique was purposive, where the episodes and scenes could be identified in accordance with the feminist discourse. The criteria used in the selection were:

1. Situations, in which female characters' fight with oppression or inequality.
2. Critical instances of social, family or institutional gender role negotiation.
3. Discussions that directly or indirectly convey ideologies concerning women rights, agency, and empowerment.

Purposive sampling is useful in that it allows an analytical depth as well as breadth in sampling which is suitable with CDA studies on media texts.

Ethical Considerations

Despite the fact that publicly aired media content is used in the study, ethical considerations were exercised as in the normal research practice (Israel & Hay, 2006):

Anonymity: The characters are not addressed by the real name of the actors, but by the fictional names.

Attribution: All the text and secondary sources are referenced correctly.

Interpretation: There is an objective and analytical presentation of findings without falsification of the dramas and their authors.

Validity and Reliability

In order to improve validity, the research applied the triangulation technique of data sources which were episode transcripts, scripts and secondary commentaries. The reliability was enhanced by peer debriefing in which thematic coding and interpretation were checked with a research colleague who was conversant with CDA. Due to a methodological transparency and reproducibility the use of a structured analytical framework (Fairclough, 2015) is warranted.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was done in the following stepwise manner:

1. **Transcription:** Verbatim transcription of the chosen scenes.
2. **Preliminary Coding:** Recognition of linguistic signs, patterns, and discursive techniques of gender and feminism.
3. **Thematic Categorization:** This means coding codes into thematic groups like oppression, resistance, empowerment and patriarchal reinforcement.
4. **Critical Interpretation:** to identify ideological positioning the interaction between language and narrative structure and social context are examined.
5. **Synthesis:** A combination of the results in the two dramas to make conclusions on how feminist discourses are constructed in the Pakistani television media.

Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis is based on 40 episodes of *Aakhir Kab Tak* (Geo TV) and *Nanhi* (Hum TV), exploring the feminist discourses that are constructed based on the language and dialogue, plot and character relationships. The themes of oppression, resistance, and empowerment, and the reinforcement of patriarchy can be detected as recurrent themes through the analysis based on Fairclough (2015) three-dimensional CDA framework, which illustrates how the media representation and social ideology are intertwined.

Thematic Findings

1. Representation of Oppression and Vulnerability

Both plays predict the experiences of oppression on women, including the aspect of domestic abuse, verbal harassment, and social exploitation. Analysis of the dialogue showed that women are frequently presented as limited by the patriarchal standards:

In the film, *Aakhir Kab Tak*, the main character, Sara, internalizes the blame of the marital abuse many times.:

“Mera ghalti se sab kuch khatam ho gaya hai... main apni himmat nahi rakh sakti.”
(Translation: “Everything went wrong because of my mistake... I cannot muster courage.”)

Likewise, in *Nanhi*, we see the impression of the helplessness of young girls to social exploitation, and this is a manifestation of the system of gendered limitations:

“Hamari koi sunta hi nahi... sab hum par hi haqdaar hain.”
(Translation: “No one listens to us... everyone thinks they have a right over us.”)

These interactions illustrate discursive patterns of power imbalance where female agency is socially and narratively constrained (Chaudhry et al., 2021; Ghaffar et al., 2025).

2. Resistance and Negotiation of Patriarchal Norms

Nevertheless, even though the contexts of both dramas are oppressive, there are also incidences of resistance in them, and this establishes that feminist discourse is not unanimously denied but is negotiated. The resistance is indicated with the help of linguistic markers, including the modality (can, must) and assertive imperatives:

Sara stands up against her abuser in *Aakhir Kab Tak*:

“Main chup nahi rahungi, meri zindagi meri hai!”
(Translation: “I will not stay silent; my life is mine!”)

One of the scenes in *Nanhi* shows a mother defying social conventions regarding the education of girls:

“Tum chaaho ya na chaaho, betiyon ko taleem milegi.”
(Translation: “Whether you like it or not, daughters will get education.”)

The discursive strategies presented in these examples create agency and empowerment and focus on the negotiation of the gender roles (Jamshaid, 2025; Raza et al., 2025).

3. Ideological Reinforcement through Narrative Structure

As resistance takes place, it is common in narratives to reaffirm patriarchal ideologies, either by the pattern of resolution or by framing devices:

In *Aakhir Kab Tak*, the aggressive behavior of the protagonist is mediated finally by male figures of power, which strengthens the hierarchical standards.

Even the girls who rebel in *Nanhi* are empowered conditional and in social acceptable limits including compliance to family elders.

This observation is consistent with previous studies that have indicated that the television dramas in Pakistan tend to generate some of the most conflicting feminist discourses, being empowering and conforming to gender role norms at the same time (Tariq & Husnain, 2025).

4. Linguistic Construction of Feminist Discourse

Lexical and grammatical analysis points at particular linguistic signs of a feminist speech:

Pronouns: The use of pronouns with the assertive statements of the main one (I) is frequent, which indicates individual agency.

Modality: Future-oriented self-determination is denoted by such phrases as *nahi rukna* (won't stop) or *karungi* (will do).

Metaphors and imagery: When the speaker mentions the names *zanjeer* (chains) or *parindah* (birds), he means restriction and freedom, respectively.

These speech patterns reveal that CDA can reveal the obscure, but ideologically meaningful construction of gender and power (Fairclough, 2015; Gee, 2014).

Comparative Insights

A comparison of the two dramas shows differences of channel specificity on the feminist discourse:

Personal trauma and conflict with social norms are highlighted by Geo TV *Aakhir Kab Tak*, and scenes are supported by dialogue that predetermines the emotional and social dilemma of women.

Hum TV *Nanhi* presupposes wider social and societal approaches, being a foreground of the systemic problems of poverty, social exploitation, and inequality, and offers a broader perspective of the society.

In the two plays, feminist discourse is negotiated and fragmented, which is indicative of the contradiction between the social realism and entertainment needs.

Synthesis of Findings

The research determines three general patterns:

1. Discursive vulnerability: Female characters are discursively and narratively placed as being susceptible to patriarchal domination.

2. Negotiated agency: There is an ambivalence in feminist representation in the form of resistance and empowerment which is constrained.

3. Ideological ambivalence: Although dialogues may provide a challenge to traditional norms, narrative resolution frequently reinforces them.

Altogether, the results indicate that Pakistani television dramas challenge and reinforce gender ideologies to create a multifaceted discursive space wherein the feminist meanings are incomplete, negotiated, and contextualized (Azam et al., 2024; Chaudhry et al., 2021; Tariq & Husnain, 2025).

Discussion

The results of this paper demonstrate that feminist discourse and patriarchal ideology interact in a complex way to shape the Pakistani television drama, which confirms the previous study that media representations are both constitutive and reflective of the societal norms (Fairclough, 2015; Chaudhry et al., 2021). Although *Aakhir Kab Tak* and *Nanhi* preempt the struggles and empowerment of women, the discursive patterns can be seen as reflecting ideological ambivalence, in which feminist agency is more often negotiated within the socialized boundaries. The resistance and empowerment are presented both in the dialogues between characters, the use of assertive language, and the use of metaphorical images. For instance, the use of pronouns and modality in statements such as “*Main chup nahi rahungi*” (“I will not stay silent”) reflects linguistic constructions of agency that contest patriarchal control (Gee, 2014). This can be supported by Jamshaid (2025) and Raza et al. (2025), who claim that feminist discourses of Pakistani dramas are often fragmented and not meaningless, and they give women characters the room to express resistance even within the confining narratives. But the research also proves that the patriarchal norms are still there. Solutions and framing, which are told in narrative terms, tend to reestablish old gender hierarchies, where male authority figures mediate the empowerment of women (Tariq & Husnain, 2025). This ambivalence echoes the claims of Chaudhry et al. (2021) that the presented depiction of women through televisions is both defiant and upholding gender roles and social contradictions between ambitious trends and conservative patriarchal traditions. It can be analyzed that the motif of vulnerability is a constant and most often through the story of domestic violence, child trafficking, and marginalization in education. These depictions underscore the socio-cultural restrictions on women in Pakistan as well as reveal the structural inequities (Azam et al., 2024; Ghaffar et al., 2025). The extensive use of passive constructions and victimizing metaphors, linguistically, is an indicator of ideological strengthening of social subordination, despite the voices of resistance.

These results confirm the information given by Fairclough (2015) that media discourse is both reflective and constitutive of social ideology, giving audiences the formulas of gendered action and normalizing the hierarchical relationships in an insidious manner.

Aakhir Kab Tak (Geo TV) and *Nanhi* (Hum TV) are similar in terms of how their ideologies are emphasized:

- Geo TV is more inclined to the individualized plight and emotional realism, which is centered on a personal conflict with social oppression.
- The foregrounding of Hum TV systemic vulnerabilities such as socio-economic and educational inequities hence provides a more general societal perspective.

Ideologically, although both channels have their differences, they both showcase ideological negotiation, in which feminist discourses do coexist with patriarchal structures, and they are influenced by commercial demands, social expectations and regulation norms.

Implications for Media and Feminist Studies

The study has three major contributions to the feminist media studies and discourse analysis:

1. Theoretical Contribution: It expands the CDA framework of Fairclough to the non-Western environment and shows how the feminist discourse is created and limited in the Pakistani television.
2. Empirical Contribution: The study provides a contextually-based corpus by a systematic analysis of accomplished dramas which depicts discursive processes of gendered representation.
3. Practical Contribution: The knowledge gained can guide content creators, policy-makers and educators on the media importance in creating normative views of women agency, and that balanced and critically aware representation is needed.

Conclusion

This paper has explored feminist discourses in the Pakistani television series, *Aakhir Kab Tak* and *Nanhi*, through critical discourse analysis approach. Results indicate that feminist meanings are defined, negotiated and mediated via language, dialogue and storyline. Although there are scenes of defiance and empowerment, both channels still have patriarchal ideologies in their representations and they give conflicting images of women. The paper singles out the ideological ambiguity of the Pakistani media in which entertainment and social commentary co-exist alongside structural support of gender hierarchies. With the emphasis on linguistic markers, thematic patterns, and narrative framing, this study proves that television dramas may challenge and reproduce social norms.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Future research can focus on the audience reception with a view of evaluating the meanings and negotiating feminist discourses by the audience in television dramas.
2. The cultural difference in feminist representation in various South Asian media situations could be compared through the study of various situations.
3. The longitudinal research would be able to trace the changing images of women and provided the perspective of the dynamic social norms and media practice.

To sum up, Pakistani TV drama plays are culturally important texts that can offer an excellent perspective on the gender ideology negotiation process. Although the feminist discourse is on the rise, it is negotiated, partial and contextual in nature, and more critically informed content production and scholarship is required in the media and feminist studies.

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