

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF GENDER REPRESENTATION IN PAKISTANI DRAMAS MERI GURIYA AND BAKHTAWAR

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Abstract

This research examines the representation of gender through language use by women in Pakistan's two Urdu dramas, Meri Guriya and Bakhtawar in relation to the interaction between discourse and gender ideologies within the Pakistani socio-cultural setting. This research seeks to understand how language plays a significant role in the construction of women's identity and how media discourse reinforces or subverts gender stereotypes. This study examines the dialogues of the plays, utilizing van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis, with the aim of identifying some prominent linguistic features used by female characters. This is a qualitative study which undertakes a textual analysis of certain dialogues from the dramas in order to demonstrate ideological tendencies and linguistic choices. The findings reveal that the traditional gender discourse still give preference to women-in-constrained, not decisive, not strong, not even willing and confident. However, Meri Guriya and Bakhtawar represent a new discourse, with more and more female characters speaking from the same linguistic position not for consent but for affirmation, power, and empowerment.

Keywords: Gender representation, gender ideology, critical discourse analysis, Pakistani dramas

Introduction

Language is important in constructing and representing social identities, such as gender. In electronic media such as television dramas, discourse becomes an influential site in the construction, reinforcement, or subversion of societal norms and ideologies. In the Pakistani culture, where patriarchal values and cultural traditions are deeply entrenched, the construction of women in Urdu television dramas can reveal how gender roles are socially constructed and negotiated through language. (van Dijk, 1998).

Discourse not only reflects cultural beliefs but also actively contributes to the construction and reification of gender roles. Character talk on television dramas particularly female character is one of the central vehicles of gender ideology transmission to a broad audience. Pakistani media tends to portray females in stereotypical categories: as emotional, submissive, dependent, or lacking confidence. By contrast, male characters are often portrayed as independent, dominant, and assertive. Such portrayals are not merely descriptive but also prescriptive, teaching the viewers what is acceptable or desirable for each gender (van Dijk, 2000; Lazar, 2005).

Nonetheless, recent developments in media discourse imply that there has been a change in the way that female characters are being represented. Instead of conforming to these stereotypical roles, some new dramas are challenging these, with the female characters now employing the same discursive resources in order to exert power and challenge patriarchal confines. This development poses essential questions regarding the changing character of gender discourse in Pakistani media and with wider social implications.

This research takes van Dijk's (1998) Critical Discourse Analysis perspective as its theoretical framework to examine how language is used to construct gender in Pakistani Urdu dramas. Given particular attention to the female characters in *Bakhtawar* and *Meri Guriya*, the research analyzes how linguistic properties like adjectives, questions, and polite expressions are employed to represent and construct gendered identities.

The overall objective of this research is to examine how language brings out the ideological stance of the female characters, how it captures power relations in patriarchal society, and how it could be playing a role in challenging changing gender roles in the Pakistani media. The assumption is that although traditional gendered discourse continues to be in the limelight, there has been an emerging trend in which female characters are reappropriating linguistic traits to exercise agency and challenge social norms.

Problem Statement

Media, particularly television dramas, plays a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions of gender roles. In Pakistan, television dramas have historically reflected and reinforced traditional gender norms, often portraying women in stereotypical roles as submissive, dependent, or confined to domestic spheres. Previous studies have explored gender representation in Pakistani media, highlighting how dramas contribute to the construction of social realities. For instance, Abbas (2018) examined the portrayal of women in Pakistani serials and found a predominance of patriarchal narratives, while Khan and Saeed (2020) focused on the representation of male authority figures, emphasizing the reinforcement of male dominance. Similarly, Rehman (2019) argued that female characters are often depicted as victims or moral guides, which limits the diversity of women's experiences in media portrayals.

Despite these valuable insights, there is a noticeable research gap in analyzing contemporary Pakistani dramas that tackle social issues more critically. Dramas such as *Meri Guriya* and *Bakhtawar* have gained attention for challenging conventional gender norms by presenting women as empowered and resilient figures confronting societal injustices. However, limited scholarly work exists on a detailed discourse analysis of these series, particularly in terms of how language, dialogue, and narrative structures contribute to gender construction. Most prior studies have either focused on older dramas or provided only descriptive analyses without employing critical discourse analysis (CDA) to interrogate power relations, ideologies, and gendered narratives.

This study seeks to fill this gap by using CDA to examine the representation of gender in *Meri Guriya* and *Bakhtawar*, investigating how these dramas construct, challenge, or reinforce gender ideologies. By doing so, the research will provide a nuanced understanding of contemporary gender portrayals in Pakistani media, contributing to both media studies and gender discourse scholarship.

Research Objectives

- To investigate the use of language by female characters in *Meri Guriya* and *Bakhtawar* to reflect or challenge traditional gender roles.
- To examine the role of language in constructing gender-based social distinctions in *Meri Guriya* and *Bakhtawar*.

Research Questions

1. How does the language used by female characters in *Meri Guriya* and *Bakhtawar* reveal the underlying ideologies of gender?
2. In what ways language construct gender-based distinctions in *Meri Guriya* and *Bakhtawar*?

Significance of the study

This study is significant for its gender analysis of the female characters of the selected Pakistani drama in the role reconstruction process, and it also observes the character's ideology to comprehend the dynamics of gender roles. The exploring linguistic features of media language in the Pakistani context, such as adjectives, polite expressions, and the use of questions. Since the media have, by and large, portrayed the male and female characters in light of the gender roles ascribed to them by society, it is only right to critically discuss media language for being such a rich soil for social representation. This research aims to furnish its

audience with an understanding of the politics of language in the media, which can be resorted to in eliminating the socially unequal practices. The implications of the study concern language, linguistics, gender studies, and sociology.

Literature Review

The study of language was drawn to feminists when Robin Lakoff came up with a book entitled, "Language and Women's place" in 1975. It is one of the excellent books, was well Taken as the best book on females within linguistics. It has greatly impacted the Field of linguistic and male and female gender studies. Various studies were done by Feminists, and it was determined that females and males select distinctive lexical items According to their gender. Through discourse, social roles are created and in the same way Discourse practices are created by social roles. This area has drawn the researchers to Investigate the roles of gender in the media discourse. This research conducts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that is a subfield of linguistics which has been providing researchers with the opportunity to examine the underlying ideologies of any discourse otherwise taken for granted. Linguistic analysis remains one of such essential tools for such research. As per Taiwo (2007) language not only gets involved in disclosing "reality" but it also builds "reality", Words that are utilized in dialogue are the interest of a writer or speaker. For the Current research, the researcher has chosen CDA of woman's discourse in Pakistani dramas. Essentially, Critical Discourse Analysis examines domination, abuse of social power, inequality etc. in Society and their sanctioning, reproduction, and resistance in the social and "political" Viewpoint (Van Dijk, 1993).

Likewise, Rameez ul Huda and Amber (2015) took media as a social change agent and researched the overall image of women in media in print and audio-visual form. They found that women are objectified, shown stereotypically and referred to as This image was found to be "morally corrupt" representation of women. Ashfaq and Shafiq (2018) conducted a content analysis of the six drama serials that had the highest viewer ratings on the three most viewed Pakistani TV channels (Geo, ARY, and HUM). They concluded that good woman in dramas is the one who is Patriarchal traditional and bad woman is the bold and professional. Iqbal and Abdar (2016) researched the female characters of eight Hum TV dramas and found that qualification and professional career was not defined for seventy percent of women characters. Years have proven through studies that television shows have women characters working as house wives and their primary Responsibility is child care and maintaining the home, whereas men are depicted as more career minded. (Anderson & Taylor 2002) also concluded that when work includes love, care, or nurturing, it is generally not thought of as work, whereas work involving occupation, leadership, or production tends to be readily known as work which is also true in Pakistani society that "outside" work for women is recognized as a favor bestowed upon them and women are loved for household chores.

Apart from this, male characters in television dramas are represented based on stereotypically so called male traits like determination, will-power, authority, and logic, instead of emotionalism. While the female characters are represented as being dependent on men, melodramatic and Hyper emotional (Khan, Ullah & Ahmad, 2018). This research fills this gap by examining the discourses used by female characters in two chosen Pakistani Urdu dramas, *Meri Guriya* and *Bakhtawar*. And the exploring linguistic features of media language in the Pakistani context such as adjectives, polite expression, and the use of questions. These dramas were chosen due to their balanced representation of female characters and their relevance to the evolving discourse on gender roles.

Despite extensive research on gender representation in Pakistani media, most studies have focused on stereotypical portrayals of women as submissive, domestic, or morally defined as "good" or "bad" based on adherence to patriarchal norms. Prior research has predominantly

employed content analysis or descriptive methods, providing limited insight into the underlying ideologies and power structures embedded in the language used by female characters. Furthermore, while some studies have highlighted the stereotypical representation of male and female traits, few have examined contemporary dramas that actively challenge traditional gender roles. There is a notable lack of critical discourse analyses focusing on how language constructs, maintains, or contests gendered social hierarchies in modern Pakistani dramas. This study addresses this gap by applying Critical Discourse Analysis to the dialogues of female characters in *Meri Guriya* and *Bakhtawar*, exploring how linguistic choices reflect and potentially transform gender ideologies in the Pakistani media context.

Research Methodology

Approach:

Qualitative method: applying van Dijk, 1993 CDA model

Research Design:

This study followed a qualitative research design utilizing a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to investigate how gendered language represents or disrupts traditional gender roles in Pakistani media. The study focused on identifying and understanding the linguistic features used by male and female characters in selected Pakistani Urdu television dramas.

Instrument/ Tool:

Sketch Engine software was used to generate word frequency lists, concordance lines, and keyword lists related to gendered terms.

Sampling Technique:

The researchers utilized purposive sampling technique. The study focused exclusively on such episodes and dialogues from *Meri Guriya* and *Bakhtawar* as were rich in gendered language.

Data Collection;

This study utilized purposive sampling in the selection of two Pakistani Urdu dramas: *Meri Guriya* (televised on ARY) and *Bakhtawar* (televised on Hum TV). These dramas were selected because they provided equal weightage to female characters and were thematically relevant to discussing gender roles and power relations within a patriarchal culture. The researcher selected 8 episodes (4 episodes from each drama) which total approximately 4.5 hours of screen time. The units of analysis included all dialogues in which the characters were interacting with male and female characters. The spoken Urdu dialogues were transcribed by the researcher into Roman English transcriptions to facilitate the analysis of linguistic aspects.

Data Transcription and Coding:

Only those segments of the conversations that highlighted the targeted linguistic features were transcribed. The researchers implemented a systematic coding process for organizing the data. Unique codes were established for every linguistic token to capture the drama title, character name, token number, and episode. The transcribed data were divided into two categories based on the gender of the speaker. This was to allow for a comparative analysis of language from men and women.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis through van Dijk's framework for Critical Discourse Analysis. The study analyzed the data specifically looking for and interpreting three linguistic features:

- Adjectives
- Polite expressions
- Questions

Each of these traits were analyzed in terms of their frequency, function, and positioning in the discourse. Though both genders were found to utilize these traits, the frequency and function of traits were different, highlighting variations in gendered power relations and stereotypical roles in the discourse. The qualitative exploration showed how the linguistic choices reflected wider social ideologies of gender roles in context within the Pakistani media's discourse.

To explore the representation of gender through language in *Meri Gurya* and its narrative representations of gender ideologies, using Teun A. van Dijk's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study highlighted specific adjectival, questioning and politeness traits used by both male and female characters.

Table 1: *Gendered language in Meri Gurya*

van Dijk's Elements	CDA	Linguistic Feature	Language Used by Female Characters	Gender Ideology Revealed
Ideology: Patriarchal belief in female weakness		Adjectives	"bechari", "kamzor", "majboor", "Masoom"	Females portrayed as fragile and helpless
Power Male normalized	Relations: authority	Polite Expressions	"jee", "maaf kijiye", "aap jo theek samjhein"	Obedience and silence is idealized
Social Internalization of oppression	Cognition: of	Questions	"Meri ghalti kya hai?" "Main kya kar sakti hoon?"	Females question themselves, not the system

Table 1 shows that the gendered language of *Meri Gurya* supports the ideologies of patriarchy using the CDA concept developed by Van Dijk, as female characters can be viewed as representations of female weakness and submissiveness. The use of terms like *bechari* (poor thing), *kamzor* (weak), *majboor* (helpless), and *masoom* (innocent) builds the image of females as frail victims who lack agency, and this is in accordance with the prevailing opinion about the inherent vulnerability of the female gender. Polite expressions such as; *jee* (yes sir), *maaf kijiye* (please forgive), *aap jo theek samjhein* (whatever you deem right) are used in the power relations to normalize the male authority through idealizing the female obedience and silence. Self directed questions fall under social cognition-*Meri ghalti kya hai?* (What is my fault) and "*Main kya kar sakti hoon?*" (What can I do?)-- expose internalized oppression, since females question their own ineffectiveness instead of questioning the injustice of the system.

Table 2: *Gendered language in Bakhtawar*

van Dijk's Elements	CDA	Linguistic Feature	Language Used by Female Characters	Gender Ideology Revealed
Ideology: and weakness based	Emotion	Adjectives	"mazboot", "be-khof", "khudmukhtar"	Females shown as resilient and capable
Power Excessive	Relations: politeness	Polite Expressions	Limited, situational politeness	Respect without submission
Social Awareness and resistance	Cognition: and	Questions	"Mera haq kyun cheena gaya?", "Main chp kyun ragoon?"	Females question injustice

Table 2 shows how female characters in Bakhtawar use subversive gendered language that van Dijk uses CDA to show the dominant ideology of women as emotional weak and subservient. The use of adjectives like mazboot (strong), be-khof (fearless), and khudmukhtar (self-determined) depict females as strong and capable actors, in contrast to the mainstream Pakistani media culture of patriarchal stereotypes. Their weak and provisional politeness in terms of power relations constitutes respect, but not submission and negotiating agency in male dominated spaces, e.g., the male disguise of Bakhtawar. More so, such questions as Mera haq kyun cheena gaya? (Why was my right?), and Main chup kyun rahoon. This is on the reason why under social cognition there is increased awareness and opposition to injustice, which creates mental representations that enable women to resist honor-based oppression.

In order to examine the role of language in constructing gender-based social distinctions in *Meri Guriya* the study, using Teun A. van Dijk's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), highlighted specific adjectival, questioning and politeness traits used by both male and female characters.

Table 3: *Gender-based social distinctions in Meri Gurya.*

van Dijk's CDA Elements	Linguistic Feature	Language Pattern	Gender Ideology Revealed
Ideology: Gender hierarchy	Adjectives (related to women)	Emotion and weakness based (weak, innocent, troubled, complicated)	Women depicted as emotionally fragile, morally burdened, and biologically/psychologically "inferior."
Power Relations: Unequal authority	Polite Expressions/Indirect requests	Excessive politeness (shayad, agar, thora) when women speak to male actors	Females placed in subordinate roles; male authority is assumed as natural and unchallengeable.
Social cognition: Silencing	Questions and self-talk	Self-blaming, defensive or guilt-laden questions (mujh se koi ghalati ho gaye? Mujhe kyun isse jhut bulaya?)	Shows lack of female agency; women internalize blame and avoid direct confrontation, reinforcing patriarchal control.

Table 3 gives social differences on gender in *Meri Gurya*. It demonstrates that female characters Shehnaz and her daughters are linguistically depicted as emotional, morally loaded, socially controlled. Adjectives point towards vulnerability, purity or trouble, which fits a conservative honour discourse in which women are construed as carriers of family izzat and, hence, high risk locations of social stigma. The speech of women is very modalized and indirect and the unequal power relations between women and Van Dijk are expressed in the following way: women are negotiating, begging, or softening their requests, whereas the male characters (husbands, elders, leaders of communities) say orders, commands, and sentences. At the social cognition level, women ask themselves a repetitive question (What did I do wrong?) instead of asking structural injustice which is linguistically silencing to feminist or resistance oriented readings but rather plays a role of strengthening internalized subordination.

Table 4: Gender-based social distinctions in *Bakhtawar*.

van Dijk's CDA Elements	Linguistic Feature	Language Used by Female Characters	Gender Revealed	Ideology
Ideology: Equality discourse (emergent)	Adjectives (about Bakhtawar)	Strength- and action-oriented (jazba,"sangtar," "mehnat," "ilmi ladki")		Bakhtawar is coded as equal to or stronger than men in moral and economic value, challenging traditional female-as-weak trope.
Power Relations: Negotiated Power	Polite Expressions	Balanced politeness: polite but firm; refuses excessive deference even to elders and officials		Bakhtawar negotiates power; respect is conditional on others' behavior, not given unconditionally due to gender.
Social cognition: Voice and agency	Questions	Assertive and confrontational questions (e.g., "aap keh rahay hain main ghar nahi ja sakti?," "Aap kis base par meri zindagi decide kar rahay hain?")		Bakhtawar claims decision-making authority over her work, study, and marriage; her language embodies emerging female agency.

According to table 4, in *Bakhtawar*, there are social differences between men and women. In the opening episodes, we find *Bakhtawar* to be an aggressive girl whose vocabulary is focused on struggling, living, and self-determination (e.g., focus on mehnat, education, dignity). Unlike *Meri Guriya*'s female characters, *Bakhtawar*'s adjectives are action and resilience oriented, signaling an ideology of equality even within a patriarchal setting. She applies polite formulae at the power level, but never falls into extreme deference; she frequently bargains, complains, or takes back her permission, rearranging the customary demand that women quietly comply with male dominance. At the social cognition level, *Bakhtawar*'s questions are rhetorically difficult and tend to involve the elders and institutions on the violations of her rights; by talking, she creates herself as a voice and agency subject, and not a victim of those violations.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above analysis, it can be deduced that the representation of gender through media discourse does shape audiences' perception on gender roles. The linguistics features specific to gender can enhance and limit the depiction of a male and female. The qualitative analysis of the discourse presented in the two dramas *Meri Guriya* and *Bakhtawar* confirms that media discourse in the context of Pakistan is a medium used to depict males and females in the desired (according to social norms) manner and females specifically in the preferred, female stereotypical way, by displaying females as dependent, indecisive, weak and unconfident; while in these dramas representative of Pakistani culture, males are portrayed as authoritarian and independent males, whereas only a part of the females are portrayed in preferred, female stereotypical ways of dependent, indecisive state, and in subordination of males. Although, a portion of females were indicated breaking these stereotypical boundaries. These females targeted the nominalization of tagged forms (not as a hedge) in their discourse in order to endorse and oppose matters. They were depicted as in the process of opposition and arguing. This may illustrate that gender roles are evolving to some extent in Pakistani discourse.

These females are also depicted as being disparaged and victimized, in their attempts of overturning the stereotypical image of women in male dominated society, by the male gender.

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