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VOICES BEHIND THE VEIL: GENDER REPRESENTATION THROUGH LANGUAGE IN PAKISTANI TELEVISION DRAMA SCRIPTS

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Abstract

The Pakistani Television Drama is a powerhouse cultural story that captivates a massive audience, both at home and abroad. However, its sometimes-compelling storylines are underpinned by complex linguistic choices which create, perpetuate and sometimes question gendered identities. The article analyses the role of language in representation of gender in TV Drama scripts on Pakistan Television which were selected from the Drama serials aired from 2020 to 2024. The feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA), developed in the light of the three-dimensional model of Fairclough is used to explain the contribution of dialogue, address terms, speech acts, and narrative voice to the gendered power dynamics. The results provide linguistic evidence of systematically patterns that subordinate women's characters and naturalize male authority in the films and also shed light on some counter-discourses that are being developed in newer films. The author maintains that it is not possible for language to be neutral in these dramas, as it will reflect and create norms and ideas about gender. The results have great implications for media literacy programmes, the process of script writing in schools and the reform of the entire media policy in Pakistan. The study contributes to an under-researched area of feminist linguistics and South Asian Media Studies which illustrates the methodological rigour through which scriptwriters make micro-level decisions that add up to macro-level representational results. The study focuses on the representation of gender in Pakistani television dramas utilizing the critical discourse analysis approach and the language and gender analysis approach. The study is in relation to the representation of gender in Pakistani television dramas using the critical discourse analysis approach and the language and gender analysis approach and a discussion on patriarchy and Urdu in the context of representation of gender in Pakistani television dramas.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Feminist Linguistics, Gender Representation, Ideological Discourse, Language and Gender, Pakistani Television Drama, Patriarchy, Urdu.*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Television drama is one of the most expressive art forms of any culture for articulating its core beliefs about gender. The national industry of drama has a unique status in Pakistan where it is viewed in homes all around the country, discussed in tea stalls and drawing rooms, and more and more watched by Pakistani people living abroad in Europe, North America and the Gulf countries. In Pakistan, drama serials on television channels such as ARY Digital, Geo Entertainment, Hum TV and A-Plus are the most popular lens through which many have come to understand, negotiate, and even reimagine their social reality. Over the course of the week, viewers learn a different sort of understanding of gender, as well as of romantic love, family obligation, and moral virtue. Fatima (2019) also notes that TV dramas constitute important cultural spaces in which the roles of men and women are reified and challenged as the medium has a strong influence on the public perception of women's roles and expectations.

Language is in the very center of this experience of the culture. Through dialogue characters are brought to life, relationships are formed, conflicts are dramatized and moral lines are drawn. It is, however, through language, more than any other dramatic device, that gender is rehearsed, coded, and negotiated. If a young bride in a serial has to bow down to her mother-in-law's instructions, and her heroine's career is always described in terms of how much her husband likes her, and the male characters talk about plans and make statements while the females ask permission and express sorrow --- these are not coincidences in the narrative. They are the story. They are the architectural forms where gender ideology manifests itself as a habit.

In the last ten years, it has been a significant shift in the global discourse on gender and media. Building on the work of scholars from various disciplines, including feminist linguistics, media studies and cultural criticism, it has been found to be a fact, albeit one with a degree of empirical substance, that media representations of gender are never a matter of chance -- they are the consequence of deliberate creative and institutional decisions concerning who speaks, how, what they are allowed to say, and importantly, what they are not. The decisions have real-life implications. They gender the attitudes of the audience, normalise specific gendered behaviours, regulate the limits of acceptable feminine and masculine and help to naturalise inequalities, as outlined by Baig and Rehman (2023). similarly, recent discourse analysis research (Gul, Ahmad, Stephen, 2026) has highlighted how gender represenatation strategies extend into digital marketing.

In Pakistan, the significance of the dialogue is much higher as it has to deal with complex and sometimes contradictory forces on both sides of the religious conservative, fast-growing urban population, higher education, the international media, and the emerging feminist voice of the public. Since the inception of the drama in the early decades of Pakistan, women's public roles have been portrayed and narrated in Pakistani drama. What it tells isn't an academic abstraction and so, as importantly, is the voice in which it tells it. It's a question of the symbolic landscape where millions of Pakistani women and girls build their imaginations of what is possible.

1.2. Topic Introduction

Language and the representation of gender in the media has long been a subject of study in a variety of disciplines. Media language, as has been shown by scholars inspired by Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis, has an ideological function; it normalises specific social arrangements by suggesting that they are inevitable or 'common sense' and not historical or culturally produced. Beyond television, corpus-assisted analysis of digital news headlines confirms that linguistic framing is systematically employed across media platforms to reinforce specific ideological perspectives (Raza, Ahmad, & Zulfiqar, 2026). Similar ideological functions of the language have been reported in academic discourse where linguistic choices reproduce gender stereotypes (see Ahmad et al., 2019, 2021). Lakoff's (1975) seminal work, which was expanded and critiqued over the following decades, laid the groundwork for the research on gendered language, the main argument of which is that language is a symbol of gender and that the language symbolizes gender and perpetuates gender inequality in circular and self-reinforcing ways. According to Kiani et al. (2023) these linguistic features in the Pakistani dramas are not just accidental; rather, they are a systematic discursive strategy that relegates women to the subordinate role of their male counterparts in different social settings.

Cameron (2020) and Wodak (2021) have been amongst the more recent scholars who have called for analyses that look at context, contradiction, and resistance, instead of just surveying the characteristics of patriarchy. Such a dynamic analysis acknowledges that, as media texts, they are not just ideological mirrors, but are sites of struggle where dominant meanings are negotiated, contested, and sometimes even inverted. This is a theoretical sophistication that is a must-have for the study of Pakistani drama. Pakistan's drama does not represent a singular, static image of the importance of gender; it is a long-standing tradition that has yielded the most conservative images of female subordination as well as some of the most forthright popular critiques on domestic violence, forced marriage and workplace harassment in the Pakistani media space.Specifically in the South Asian context, the research has turned towards the importance of Urdu and Punjabi (the two languages dominant in Pakistani television) to carry feminine and masculine

ideologies in their grammar, registers, and discourse norms. For example, Urdu honourifics and addresses are extremely complex, their meaning and usage being bound up with social systems and gender relations. If a woman character is constantly referred to as a diminutive or infantilizing term and the male characters address her formally, the language itself conveys a hierarchy which may not be explicitly described in the characters' actions. It is seen in all exchanges, but it's not noticed by viewers who have internalized it as a natural way of speaking. One of the main points of the current research is how these subtle, but pervasive patterns are manifested. Nawaz et al. (2023) show that the formal and deferential registers are given to the female characters in TV dramas in a systematic way that reinforces and illustrates the patriarchy.

1.3. Main Argument

The main theme of this article is that language is not only a reflection of social attitudes but is also a primary instrument that produces the gender ideologies (see Ahmad et al., 2021), which are socially constructed and then accepted in Pakistani television dramas scripts. In particular, the author claims that the linguistic features that are allotted to the characters in scripts (such as the allocation of speech act types, address forms and registers, narrative authority and perspective-giving features, and grammatical encoding of agency versus passivity) systematically marginalize female characters as subordinate, reactive, and shaped by their domestic relationships, whereas male characters are given autonomy and social and moral agency in their speech.

This is not only a surface-level argument for the 'sexism' of Pakistani dramas, but also one that suggests the opposite of true sexism.This is a much deeper argument than the surface level argument of Pakistani dramas being 'sexist'. What the point is, is the fact that gender inequality is deeply rooted in the content of the language in dramatic dialogue, and it's there in subtle ways, lurking just below the surface so it's more impactful as an ideology. A well-developed, autonomous female protagonist can be present in a drama at the level of plot summary, but systematically absent from the plot at the level of language (hedging of directives, interruption of conversational initiatives, shaping of statements by male characters' responses, the use of honor vocabulary when the female character transgresses social expectations). This study aims to sketch the interface between the content claimed by a drama as regards gender and the language it actually performs. In particular, Mehmood et al. (2024) explore drama Sar-e-rah and find that, while the story itself may "challenge" traditional gender stereotypes, the linguistic elements used in the dialogue may keep the traditional power dynamic intact, meaning that "progressive" content does not necessarily manifest linguistically.

1.4. Counter-Argument

One of the key arguments that can be raised against this is that, in the last ten years, Pakistan has developed a strong body of dramas and stories that actively contest the

patriarchal norms to a certain degree.One of the notable and plausible criticisms of this argument is that there exists a notable and celebrated collection of dramas and stories in Pakistan in the past decade that question and challenge the patriarchy, to a certain extent. Dar Si Jati Hai Sila (2018), Udaari (2016), Mann Mayal (2016) and other films have now made it more difficult to give a straight-forward, condemnatory account of the medium, with films about workplace harassment, domestic violence, divorce rights, and professional autonomy of women coming in waves in recent years.

But the critics of blanket condemnations of Pakistani drama do notice that these dramas have measurably and meaningfully altered the public discourse on topics such as child sexual abuse, forced marriage, and a woman's legal right to divorce (Naqvi & Butt, 2023). But the response from social media on these dramas, opinion polls of viewers and the increased inquiries received by the NGOs after the airing of issue based dramas point towards the fact that the impact of drama is not limited to strengthening the status quo. It is problematic that this transformative potential is hard to explain, if the language of drama scripts were only a tool of the patriarchy.

Although there is a certain level of progress in representation of plots, there is still no significant shift in the representation of women in Pakistani dramas, as the limited linguistic and discursive ability of dramas still work within the framework of traditional social norms and patriarchal structures, argue Tariq and Husnain (2021).

1.5. Inference

It is this opposition between drama as a patriarchal ideology and drama as a means to critique and challenge society, that makes a linguistic analysis of the scripts of Pakistani television such a fruitful intellectual exercise. An analysis of the situation does not reveal a static, unchanging patriarchy, nor does it reveal an easy linear progress to change. Instead, it speaks of a challenging cultural landscape, where powerful language structures are often deployed to silence women in productions that are supposed to convey progressive messages, while other counter-discursive strategies in the same texts provide partial, but sometimes significant, opportunities for other gender stories to emerge.

This complexity can only be understood through an analysis that is attuned to the system that the language of the drama creates as well as to the moments of resistance and rupture that complicate the system. The critical discourse analysis (CDA), based on feminist theory and context and contradiction, does just this. The present study is not meant to be a judgement on Pakistani drama but it seeks to shed light on the linguistic mechanisms for the enactment of the drama's gender politics and thus to make them the objects of conscious reflection and transformation.

1.6. Research Gap

While there has been an increasing volume of research and analysis on Pakistani television dramas, there is a lack of systematic and detailed linguistic analysis of the micro

level features of the dramatic dialogue in relation to the construction of gender representation. Most studies focus either on the content which the language carries (content analysis rather than language use analysis) or on a very general description of the language used to convey content, in terms of characterization and narrative structure. Malik and Hameed-ur-Rahman (2020) in a longitudinal study found that there were a set of persistent gender stereotyping patterns over time, but emphasized the importance of a more detailed micro-level examination of the language to elucidate how gender stereotype patterns are realized in the actual language of dramatic dialogue.

The issue of how the particular and clearly recognisable linguistic options such as lexical selection, semantic field, speech act type and felicity conditions of speech acts, address form, register, tag questions, hedging devices, patterns of interruption and topic management and the use of direct speech versus reported speech collectively account for the gendered representation in Pakistani dramas has not been studied systematically. This is especially noteworthy as the impact of drama on public gender attitudes in Pakistan has been noted and the Pakistani Diaspora in the country and the international audience watching Pakistani TV shows on various platforms are growing in numbers. Suggested Citation Text: Preliminary corpus-based studies have specifically identified discourse markers as key linguistic sites where gender discrimination is enacted in Pakistani serials (Abid, Siddique, & Ahmad, 2024).

1.7. Research Questions

The following research questions are used to guide this study:

RQ1 is aimed to identify the patterns of linguistic representation of male and female characters in the Pakistani television drama scripts and how these patterns reflect and reinforce gender ideologies.RQ1 is to identify gender ideologies in drama scripts of Pakistani television in terms of linguistic representations of male and female characters.

RQ2: What role do certain features of discourse (such as address forms, speech act type, narrative voice and conversational control) play in the process of building or undermining gendered power structures in the studied script corpus?

RQ3: In what ways do drama scripts in 2022-2024 demonstrate the presence of meaningful discursive changes towards the more equitable representation of gender and what are the kinds of discursive forms that these counter-discursive moves take on?

1.8. Significance of the Study

This research is part of a number of parallel, yet interconnected, conversations, both scholarly and practical. For the media scholar, it provides a methodologically sound account of the ideological functioning of language in one of the world's most popular traditions of drama, one which is vastly under-represented in anglophone studies. For feminist linguists, it is an extension of the use of critical discourse analysis to a South Asian media context with unique cultural frames and social interests that also exhibit

unique linguistic characteristics. As illustrated in their comprehensive handbook, the systematic study of discourse patterns in media texts has important implications for research and intervention, and therefore, the type of detailed linguistic analysis undertaken in this study has a direct impact on media production practices and policy development (Tannen et al., 2015).

The study also provides specific, evidence-based ideas for practitioners (scriptwriters, story editors, producers, network content executives) to consider when making decisions about language at the scriptwriting stage, so that decisions can be made more deliberately and in a way that is more equitable. For policy makers and educators who are interested in gender parity in Pakistan's media, it also offers analytic tools for media literacy interventions which take into consideration the linguistic aspect of representation, which as this study shows, is crucial and often neglected.

2. Literature Review

The academic discourse on language and gender portrayal in South Asian Television Drama falls under the purview of numerous fields of literature such as feminist linguistics, critical discourse analysis of media texts and South Asian cultural and media studies. The present work is a thematic summary of the most relevant recent scholarship which has developed along three interrelated themes, mutually illuminating each other. The review mainly focuses on the literature from 2020 to 2025, and selectively references earlier fundamental literature to support the theory.

2.1. Theme 1: Language of gender stereotyping in TV drama

The topic of language and gender stereotyping in television has been a widely researched topic since the 1990s, and has recently become more of an empirical focus as well as gaining more theoretical interest. Initial research in this tradition was concerned with the most salient examples of linguistic sexism, such as the use of the generic masculine pronoun, diminutive address forms, sexist idioms and proverbs, and engaged in an investigation of the prevalence of these in media texts. The underlying model of the language was one of reflection: if sexist language was used often in the media, then there was a sexist social context which the media was reflecting, in some way. Early CDA was criticized in some instances for its too direct a connection between linguistic patterns and social structures, which has resulted in more complex theoretical models that consider complexity, contradiction and the dynamic nature of the production of ideological meaning. (Breeze 2015)

Later scholarship has focused on a more processual and dynamic view of language as a construction site of ideology, and pays attention to how the choice of language within a media text reflects, and at the same time constructs social meanings of gender. Theoretically, the change has been productive, moving from a language-as-mirror perspective to a language-as-mechanism perspective, which has allowed researchers to

analyze the role of media language in not only representing but influencing the social world that they seemingly depict. According to Luke (2002), critical discourse analysis has developed from merely an ideological critique into a more complex instrument for the analysis of the working of power in language, so it is significant for these analyses of the Pakistani drama that they identify certain subtle linguistic mechanisms that work in favour of the power.

The study of Khan and Malik (2022) was one of the most in-depth studies on language and gender stereotyping in Pakistani Television Drama (T.V.D.). They used a corpus of eighteen drama serials from 2019 to 2021 together with corpus linguistic tools and critical discourse analysis to discover regularities in the linguistic differentiation of male and female characters. They found that the emotional and relational speech acts, such as declarations of love, expressions of distress, supplications and appeals for help, laments and confessions, were significantly more likely to be attributed to female characters, whereas the informational, directive, and evaluative speech acts (commands, advice-giving, authoritative declarations, explicit moral judgments) were more likely to be attributed to male characters.

One of the more significant points Khan and Malik found was the hedging and epistemic modality. Even though female characters were presumably in formal roles of authority within the stories, they were significantly more likely to hedge and qualify their remarks; to use markedly more tag questions and epistemic modal expressions ("I think," "I suppose," "I think maybe," "I suppose perhaps," etc.), apologies, and expressions of uncertainty. All of them were senior women physicians, businesswomen, and experienced politicians, but they all were given a "tentativeness and qualification" linguistic profile which frustrated the authority their story positions would imply, while the female characters in similar roles were given corresponding authoritative, unhedged, and unqualified linguistic profiles.

The results of this study align well with the limited results but very comprehensive study conducted by Ahmad (2022) about the portrayal of educated and successful female lead characters in dramas of Hum TV.The results of this research are found to be in line with the smaller but very detailed study conducted by Ahmad (2022) on Hum TV dramas with educated and successful female lead characters. Ahmad discovered that even in dramas that were specifically written to promote women's career success and greater social agency, the linguistic representation of women's authority, competence and relationships were systematically undermined by what she calls "compensatory femininity" -- a linguistic pattern that marks the competence of the female character as exceptional, extraordinary and slightly transgressive, yet the failure of the female character and relational inadequacies are treated as the status quo. This architectural structure of language renders the drama seemingly progressive at the plot level: "Look, a woman can

do a job!"; but also conservative at the deeper level, where female agency always seems to be gained despite the odds, against nature.In the same vein, Singh and Priya (2022) conclude that the politics of women's representation in Pakistani media takes place at multiple planes at the same time and the language used often is contradictory to narrative progressiveness, making them an intricate representational field that audiences have to navigate and deal with competing discursive messages.

The study conducted by Farooq & Shahzad (2021) on Address Terms (AT) in Pakistani Family Dramas is the missing link to this. They scripted the dramatic and regular disparity in genders of character's interaction in the course of ten popular serials in respect to various relations within the family and community. Female characters that address male characters, especially those of equal and superior social standing, generally employed more formal, deferential and respectful registers, such as a greater frequency of honorific particles, formal second person pronouns and kinship terms that emphasized the social position of the male character, than male characters addressing female characters of equivalent social standing used in response. The asymmetry was not only found in the characterisation of the individuals, but it was a structural aspect of the language of the dramatic text which made the patriarchy of its context seem like a natural convention.

In relation to the general theories of cultural reproduction, Baig and Rehman (2023) rely on Althusser's theory of the ideological state apparatuses and Bourdieu's symbolic violence to conclude that these stereotypes that are embedded in Pakistani drama language are working with a particular force of ideology, especially because they are invisible. Stylized and artistic, dramatic dialogue is not documentary and readers and viewers unconsciously read it as such, as naturalistic, realistic, and therefore as just 'how people talk'. The naturalization of linguistic gender stereotypes, they claim, is symbolic violence, which is even more effective because it is invisible, incomprehensible, and unappealable.The method used in the present study owes much to feminist stylistic analysis, which has been developed by Mills (1995) to show how "neutral" linguistic decisions in literary and media texts are systematically connected to assumptions of a patriarchal position.

2.2. Theme 2: Power relationships and patriarchal discourse in Pakistani dramas

A second stream of relevant scholarship goes beyond the focus of whether and how language stereotypes gender to the question of how language constructs and reproduces a structure of power -- in this case the patriarchal structure of power that prevails in much of the Pakistani dramatic narrative. This literature draws on a critical discourse analysis perspective of Fairclough (1992), van Dijk (2015) and Wodak (2021) which focuses on how language in media texts can reflect and actively legitimise specific power relations, naturalising them as just.One of the most consistent and detailed description of the linguistic construction of patriarchal power in Pakistani television is found in Zahid and

Iqbal's (2023) study on Speech Act Pattern in Popular Drama Serials. They selected 12 dramas to analyze from 2020-2023, creating a coding system for each speech act in their sample, including characteristics of the speaker, type of speech act, gender of the addressee, and --- importantly --- of the outcome of the interaction. They observed which characters' orders were followed in the story, who got their questions answered, and who took up, extended, or didn't take up the conversational ballon of other characters. They conclude that, even after taking into account the differences in characters' status and position in the narrative, male characters' speech acts were significantly more likely to be felicitous, or to achieve the intended communicative effect, than female characters' speech acts.

The dynamics were most clearly illustrated in the study's portrayal of the authority figures of women. While other characters in the plot might obey, the controlling mother-in-law's command was always presented in the larger discourse of the plot as manipulative, oppressive, and/or emotionally overpowering and not as just, rational exercise of domestic authority. The result was to demonstrate women's exercise of power and at the same time to negate it and to keep any apparent female power in an ideologically sanctioned frame of reference, thereby maintaining the patriarchy. The power of the feminine element was always --- and indeed in the vocabulary of these dramas was always --- a sort of usurpation, accepted perhaps, but not justified. This is in line with Fairclough's (2013) overall argument that language is not only a reflection of social phenomena but that it constitutes them, in the sense that it actively constructs social reality and that a detailed analysis of dramatic language is not an academic exercise but rather an essential intervention in the understanding of and in social relations.

The message is that women have no power to assert themselves in their own language yet they are being denied their voice in the language of drama; this is a recurring theme in the scholarship on Pakistani drama. Siddiqui and Noor (2022) chronicle it from a different, but complementary, discursive perspective, using the discourse of morality and family honor as a prism through which to analyze the ways that it is used unevenly across the different genders of dialogue speakers. They have used a collection of scripts from twelve dramas addressing issues of marital conflict, infidelity, and domestic violence and found that female characters' misdemeanours -- from premarital romantic discussion to professional achievement in opposition to family expectations -- were linguistically (and socially) marked with a rich and specific vocabulary of shame, including terms like 'dishonour' (be-izzati), 'impurity' (na-pak), and 'social disgrace.' These terms were not used to describe male characters' more significant or similar misdeeds. The use of the term infidelity to describe the actions of men, the absence of men from the family, violence, and financial exploitation were minimized and naturalized or blamed on male external factors and provocation of females. As such, the language of honor in this analysis can be

understood as a sophisticated mechanism of ideology which serves to perpetuate gendered power structure in the narratives which are seemingly pro-women sufferings.

Complementing the evidence provided by Hassan and Siddique (2023), a discussion of the discursive construction of masculinity in Pakistani dramas reveals that male characters are always depicted as moral authorities and decision makers, whereas misogynistic attitudes are also often seen as common sense through the discourse, as a linguistic environment in which patriarchy is presented as common sense rather than ideology.

Including the analysis of the narrative voice -- which one is linguistically at the centre of the drama's discourse and who is the subject rather than the object of the narrative, and therefore has a voice -- brings one more layer to the ideological picture. Hussain and Cheema (2024) made a comparative study between voice-over narration, internal monologue representation and free indirect discourse in a large drama serial corpus and showed statistically significant and consistent differences between the two in the use of these devices that express perspective. Male characters were more likely to be directly impacted by the subjectivity of the narrative (his own thoughts and emotions, conveyed through elements that allow the audience to identify with and understand the narrative), than female characters, who had their interiority more often represented through male characters' interpretation of female characters' behavior, or through narration by a third person, by which the female characters' own experiences were the object of the male narrator's gaze rather than his own. The asymmetry of the narration voice has an effect on the most basic elements of the viewers' experience: which suffering they can feel from the inside and which they can feel at the outside. This result is consistent with van Dijk's (2015) framework for the analysis of the power relations reflected and reproduced in discourse, in which he highlights that the control over the perspective of the narration is a symbolic power that influences the audience's perception of the social roles and relations.

This is similar to the findings of Abid et al. (2024) based on corpora which revealed that discourse markers are important linguistic contexts where gender discrimination is manifested, and the markers are consistently used by the male characters to assert their authority, while the markers are consistently used by the female characters to show uncertainty and deference.

2.3. What is the representation of women in works of art like, and what are the new counter-narratives? (Theme 3)

The third theme in this review, focuses on change, with the evolution of language in Pakistani dramas in recent years, but also on the ways in which alternative discourses or approaches to narrative that cast light on and contest dominant gender narratives have emerged.The most systematic methodological analysis of this evolution is given by Naqvi and Butt (2023), who have conducted a longitudinal study of the language gender patterns

in the popular drama serials produced from 2010 to 2023. They examine how the following linguistic variables changed over the course of the thirteen years, focusing on female- and male-initiated conversation, whether or not female characters appear as voice-over narrator voices in the narration, and whether female characters are the agents themselves in professional and sexual situations. Their conclusions tell a true nuanced story. In some aspects---most notably in the direct linguistic portrayal of professional agency for female characters and female professional agency in the explicit statements of women's desires, rights, and boundaries---there is a measurable and statistically significant shift toward more equitable linguistic representation, with the majority of the change taking place between 2018 and 2023. On other aspects of text---such as the linguistic marking of female transgression, the use of shame-related discourse to regulate female behavior, and the allocation of the authority of unhedged speech acts---patterns have remained quite consistent despite appearances of changes in plot construction and the type of character's transgression.

Aslam and Qayyum (2022) document and elaborate on the same pattern in the context of the Pakistani drama where they have examined the construction of female solidarity in the language. The productions made earlier in the serials basically established female characters as competitors, in their struggle for male attention, domestic power, social status and family wealth, whereas more recent productions demonstrate significant signs of what Aslam and Qayyum label as "solidarity discourse," characterized by frequent conflict-related speech acts between female characters and the lack of supporting, collaborative or mutually affirming communication patterns. The discourse in this text is marked by higher rates of positive answer tokens, interactional completion of conversations, explicit language marking shared gendered experience and collective grievance, and the formation of new gendered mentor relationships, where older female characters linguistically serve and empower younger female characters, but do not undermine their autonomy.

The authors point out that the idea of solidarity is not necessarily politically progressive, but can be combined with, in some instances, conservative ideas about gender roles in the home. Women supporting as a solidarity in the name of protecting family honour is not an actual counter-discourse in any meaningful way; nor is solidarity among women in the enforcement of traditional femininity a real counter-discourse. However, the act of collectively naming and resisting a specific form of gendered harm by female characters is a linguistically significant shift from the hegemony of discourse in the film medium which has, until now, been dominated by a dominant male voice. This discovery also aligns with Cameron's (2020) observation that in the present day of apparent gender parity, the 'persistence of patriarchy' in language persists through subtle yet systematic processes.

Zainab and Hussain (2024) build on this analysis by exploring the linguistic representation of female anger and resistance in Pakistani drama in the most political aspect of the counter-discursive turn. The corpus of twenty dramas (2020-2024) with a female protagonist, who is actively resisting against domestic violence, forced marriage or sexual harassment, offers a unique perspective for analysis of how the emotion of female anger, one of the most culturally policed emotions in the Pakistani drama corpus, is linguistically constructed and framed. According to their results, there is a great and growing conflict. In an increasing number of these dramas, space for women to express anger in unhedged, first-person speech; space for women to express refusal; space for women to express justice demands. But the over-all discourse organization of many serials still stigmatizes and naturalizes its radical claim by narrative framing that ends by romanticizing and exceptionalizing her angry woman: her linguistic action is corrective, but only because of extreme provocation, not because of structural injustice.The drama Udaari was analyzed by Jamshaid and Fatima (2023) who also concluded that although the serial brought into focus the topic of sexual abuse and women's rights, the drama discussed verbal expressions of power and gender-oriented dynamics, evidencing the disconnect between the progressive content and the conservative linguistic features with respect to the traditional patriarchal power structures.Asif (2024) supports this analysis by conducting a wider content analysis to look into the trends of gender portrayal at the content level for several drama serials, he points out that although the authors began to make changes in the content level, there is no complete consistency in these changes at the linguistic level of gender relations.

2.4. Synthesis and Research Gap

Despite the rather extensive and more refined literature cited above, there is still a considerable analytic vacuum. Although the current scholarship has documented the existence of gendered linguistic patterns in Pakistani drama, and outlined the general trends of change in the field, it has yet to offer a systematic description of how these patterns are interwoven and function at the same time as a coherent system of language across several linguistic levels, namely, lexical choice, speech act structure, address form, narrative voice, and discourse organization, all of which collectively produce and reinforce gender ideologies. Males who are never granted over-narrative access are not simply given the over-narrative access to their female characters in the deferential register who are speaking in the patriarchal register, but whose direction is surrounded by a hedge. To understand how these levels support and/or contribute to each other requires just the integrated multi-level analysis that the present study is concerned with.The study by Imran et al. (2024) is pragmatic, concentrating on lexical choices during divorce scenes, which found that even in the context of female resistance and the assertion of rights, the lexical choices often reduce the agency of women and divorce is presented as a personal failure,

rather than a legitimate legal right, thereby reinforcing the pattern as explained by Zainab and Hussain.

3. Methodology

The study explored the representation of gender in television drama scripts of Pakistan adopting the qualitative research approach with feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA). The focus on a qualitative primary structure was driven by the central concern of this study: the interpretation of the meaning-making of language --- whether the question of the linguistic production of gender meanings or the quantity of linguistic frequencies per se. The patterns and proportions which were subsequently interpreted and explained in the in-depth discursive analysis were rather established using quantitative content analysis at certain points in the research.

3.1. Research Design

This study was conducted using feminist critical discourse analysis perspective, based on Fairclough's (1992) three dimensional model of discourse, where the text dimension (specific linguistic and semiotic features of the text itself), the dimension of discursive practice (processes of text production, distribution and consumption), and the dimension of social practice (broader social contexts within which the text is embedded and which it in turn reproduces or potentially transforms) were concurrently analyzed. The chosen framework was chosen because it steered clear of the mistake of making language the transparent window through which to view pre-given social reality and the alternative of making language entirely free from social conditions (which is also an important balance for a study of the social construction of the social world that language portrays as simply describing it). According to Wodak (2023), that is an 'ideological mechanism of power system' in which language establishes and maintains social hierarchy through differential treatment of social groups.A major focus of the study was on the analytical perspective of the feminist dimension of the analytical framework, based mainly on the work of Cameron (2020) and Lazar (2005), which focused on feminist CDA. Specifically, a series of organizing analytical questions were used throughout the analysis: Who is linguistically centre in these scripts and who is left to the margins or silenced? How are subjectivities of women and men discursively produced and what emotional, social and moral properties do these subjectivities bestow on gendered bodies? What is the space for and foreclosed alternative and potentially emancipatory gender narratives in where and how these scripts are produced? This validation is evidence to support Lazar's (2005) argument that feminist CDA presents a 'powerfully potent framework' for investigating 'the way in which the ideology of gender is instantiated, reproduced, and challenged' in media discourse, and that the often-invisible mechanisms of patriarchal power become visible through the use of this approach.

Scripts from 15 television drama serials (2020-2024) of Pakistan, produced through purposive sampling to represent different channels, genre, time and production contexts were chosen as a study corpus. Scripts were obtained from a mix of official channel digital archives, production company archives and a national television script database which is co-ordinated with PEMRA. In selecting serials, efforts were made to have variety and gender balance in three broad categories -- family drama, social issue drama, and romance serial -- as well as to include productions from the top-selling mainstream segment of the serials industry and the prestige drama segment that are always being produced and have received critical acclaim.A total of three episodes were chosen for detailed analysis from each serial, the first, episode corresponding to the midway point of the narrative or a significant turning point in the plot and the penultimate or final episode. The sample was set up to provide a snapshot of the initial language construction of characters and relationships, as well as how they evolve and might change during the serial's story line. Overall, the final corpus consisted of forty-five complete episode scripts with about 850,000 words of transcribed speech and stage direction.A random sample of 30% of the scenes with talking characters of both sexes was used in this corpus for systematic quantitative analysis. This probability sample was augmented with a purposive sample of scenes that were determined to be significant areas of gendered linguistic negotiation through initial close reading, such as conflict over domestic authority, gender crossing in professional interaction, gender explicit discussion of gender roles and women's rights, and resistance or transgression scenes by the female.

3.2. Instruments

In the process of data collection, and analysis, several methodological instruments were used by complementary sequences. The focus data was the entire set of episode scripts described above. Scripts were coded, retrieved, and cross-referenced systematically in NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software by being stored in a standardized digital format. The in-depth discursive analysis was conducted using a structured analytical protocol which was refined because of pilot analysis on a small set of scripts (n = 5) that were not part of the main study. The coding of this protocol involved formal coding of type of speech act (following the taxonomy of Searle, 1969, adapted for dramatic dialogue contexts), address form and register, voice device of narrative, conversational topic initiation and management, lexical field cluster (especially around the semantic domains of Honor and shame, emotion and interiority, authority and agency), and the presence and type of hedging and epistemic qualification.

A secondary instrument was a structured content analysis schedule to identify the quantitative baseline patterns in the corpus for further detailed analysis. This schedule, which was developed in consultation with accepted schedules from corpus linguistics, and adapted for the purposes of analysing a dramatic script, was employed to provide a

quantitative basis for the analysis of frequencies of linguistic variables from each speaker gender and from each genre category, which informed and structured the interpretative analysis that followed.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected in three stages. In the first phase, all the episode scripts were collected and transcribed to include all texts, verified for transcription completeness and correctness, and unified in format. The second phase consisted of two trained research assistants independently performing the structured content analysis with interrater reliability checks carried out at regular intervals during coding. The interrater reliabilities for the main categories of coding averaged 0.84 on Cohen's Kappa statistic which is generally considered to represent high interrater agreement for qualitative content analysis. Discussions were used to resolve disagreements and where needed, the analytical protocol and theoretical framework were used to refer to.

In the third and most intensive phase, the primary researcher engaged in detailed feminist CDA of the purposive sample of scenes, using the analytical protocol, but being open to the interpretation which is typical of qualitative research – being alert to unexpected patterns, anomalies and contradictions that did not fit into the coding categories a priori, but could be analytically significant. In this phase of analysis, it was done in an iterative way, alternating between close reading of individual scenes and generalizing over patterns of the corpus, following the schema of analytic induction.

4. Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out in four stages in an integrated manner. First, the quantitative content analysis resulted in a baseline pattern of the distribution of the key linguistic variables in the corpus, hence providing a statistical snapshot of the correlation between which linguistic variables were found in which speaker genders and which genre categories. Second, the thematic coding in NVivo generated clusters of related practices in language and started to map the links between these clusters and character gender, genre category, broadcast year and narrative context. Third, at the specific level of textual detail, the identified patterns of language were analysed in terms of their functioning ideologically in the specificity of the interactional context, e.g., the same speech act type, a directive, can have very different ideological weight, depending on who produces it, with what accompanying hedging or confidence marking, and with what accompanying narrative response. Fourth, variation by genre, broadcast year, and character type was compared, allowing an evaluation of the extent to which dominant trends continue and the type and degree of counter-discursive change.

4.1. Ethics

The study was reviewed and ethical approval has been obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. The application of publicly broadcast drama scripts

to analysis of research was found to be within the scope of the provisions of the academic research use of publicly available cultural materials. Production companies and channel archives were reached by formal, written requests with a statement of the academic interest in the research and the researchers' commitment to responsible representation. All information was kept and managed according to institutional information management and privacy policies. Media texts of publicly available media were the object of the study and there was no need for such individual informed consent. From the beginning, the study demonstrates respect for ethical principles in responsible research on gender and media, specifically by avoiding reproduction of harmful gender stereotypes in the analytical description of the text, and by representing the actual text complexity and internal contradictions, instead of giving them a simple verdict.

The results of the analysis of the fifteen-serial corpus were complicated, sometimes contradictory, and full of rich detail. The major patterns identified are presented here in an integrated fashion, around the three research questions; with illustrative examples taken from the scripts where the patterns are analytically productive.

4.2. Systemic Patterns in Language and Gender Ideologies

Most regular and statistically significant results in the entire body of texts were the tendency of male characters to present speech act types that were generally more frequent than the corresponding speech act types of female characters. In all fifteen serials and the three genre categories, male characters were significantly more likely to be given directive speech acts than female characters; expressive speech acts, such as declarations of love and devotion, expressions of distress and grief, appeals and supplications, apologies, and confessions were more likely to be assigned to female characters. This is not only on the macro level, but on the micro level, both within individual scenes and within individual character relationships, and within individual characters themselves in different kinds of scenes. It was more an intrinsic quality of the dramatic language and not so much of individual characters or stories.

The significance of this finding for ideology was that it was found even when it could be assumed that it would not have been present if it was not for an ideology. In the scenes where female characters were portrayed as professionally successful, formally educated, or as clearly independent and strong-willed, directive speech acts for these individuals were frequently hedged down in a systematic way, thereby systematically reducing the authoritative power of these speech acts. A hospital consultant, who happens to be a woman, rather than the unhedged “Let's do something” that an equivalent man would be told by his medical direction in the same story situation, begins with the less forceful “I think perhaps we should consider…”. Unlike her male counterpart in the same serial, her professional opinion was preceded by the words: "In my opinion, but of course you'll want to consider all your options…". The pattern of hedged professional authority

is just as Ahmad's (2022) construct of "compensatory femininity" and is systematic by the entire corpus, indicating that it is not necessarily individual characterization but rather a convention of the dramatic language.

The same regular gendered imbalance was apparent when the gender differences in address forms and registers were analyzed. Overall, female characters were significantly more likely to be addressed as diminutive, infantilizing, or as a domestic role; male characters were more often addressed as a professional role or social status or as an individual identity. The pattern of this turned out to be particularly remarkable: the same character, who is a respected mother in one scene and a childlike wife or loved daughter in another, is the one that plays out the contractual and conditional nature of female status in the alternating modes of address.

Consistent and ideologically significant asymmetries were found in the frequency of topic initiation, the frequency of topic maintenance, and the frequency of topic completion within conversational control analysis based on the patterns of topic initiation, topic maintenance and topic completion in the scenes of mixed-gendered conversational interaction. In mixed-gender scenes, male characters initiated more talk about topics and male-initiated topics were significantly more likely to be picked up on and elaborated by following conversational moves. Female-originated topics were, however, more often diverted, rejected or generally ignored and the discussion was moved back to male-initiated topics. The most interesting finding was conversational control and framing of narratives, wherein characters that were able to control the direction of the conversation and achieve their communicative ends were more likely to be antagonistic and morally ambiguous, while protagonists were more likely to be conversational subordinates, whose subordinate status in the language enacted in the conversation was reliable evidence of their moral rectitude and audience worthy suffering.

4.3. Discourse features and gendered power

This analysis of the honor–shame semantic domain resulted in particularly interesting insights into the deep lexical structure of the language of drama, reflecting the embedding of patriarchy. In the corpus, the semantic field of honor (izzat, ghairat, sharm, haya and similar) was used quite asymmetrically in relation to the transgression of gendered norms. This honor vocabulary was used to evaluate female behavior but not male behavior and the evaluative impact of honor-related terms on female transgression was always more absolute, more evaluative, and more consequential on social norms than their impact on male behavior.

In all the scripts, the violation of familial honor was emphasized when women transgressed, whether it be by engaging in the conversation of a romantic love affair without a husband or establishing a career for which family disapproved, asserting their legal rights, or choosing to divorce an abusive husband. It was linguistically located not

only as a private choice with a private impact but as a social event with a social impact; the impact was irreversible and is even stained with the honor vocabulary. Male misbehaviors of equivalent or more gravity – infidelity, domestic violence, financial exploitation, emotional abandonment – were discursively rendered in a different language, a language that speaks to individual weakness, provocation from the outside, the pressures of manhood, or even the extenuating circumstances of male emotional complexity. This unbalanced honor discourse had a cumulative effect: the world in the language of the scripts constituted one in which female autonomy was seen as dangerous, and male excess was seen as understandable.

The results of the analysis of the distribution of narrative voice were consistent with Hussain and Cheema (2024) as in the study they found the distribution of the narrative voice as main voice, subordinate voice, and neutral voice. Across the corpus, voice-over narration (the most direct of all narrative perspective-granting devices) was mainly used for male characters or for gender neutral omniscient narrators, rather than for female characters. Male characters of similar narrative centrality were much more likely to be presented in terms of internal monologue representation or free indirect discourse (allowing the reader/watcher to hear the inner voice of a character, enabling identification and understanding) than the female characters of similar centrality. When it was present, female interiority was more frequently described by other characters, by inference from the characters' conduct or by way of narrative commentary.When it did appear, female interiority tended to be more indirect: described by other characters, by inference from the characters' conduct or by way of narrative commentary. The implications of this discovery for empathy and identification with the audience are significant: viewers are always put in a position to identify with the female characters—trying to see into their lives from the outside—but never with the male characters—they are always seen from the inside.

4.4. Linguistic Shifts and Counter-Discursive Practice

When comparing to the scripts in the last four years (2020 to 2024), one may observe genuine but irregular changes in these scripts, which are in line with the general trends of a partial evolution as found in the secondary literature. During the productions of 2022-24, some of the linguistic features which are not significantly present in the previous part of the corpus were identifiable.

Perhaps most importantly, female characters in social issue dramas written during this period were much more likely to speak of their own rights, needs and refusals in first person declarative and directive statements, often without hedges. The confident first person claim, the declarative form and the appeal to rights as opposed to mercy are a different linguistic style from that of the character's supplicatory and apologetic language historically found in the same narrative contexts. Measures of this assertive language style,

which is directly directed at rights, rose significantly from the second half of the corpus for female characters.

But — and it is an analytical necessity — these counter-discursive linguistic turns were all always enmeshed in other discourses that complicated and sometimes made negative the progressive meanings of these moves. The drama was also a serial that was most vocally and powerfully asserting the right to safety for its female protagonist, but it also had the framework of an extraordinary suffering, which makes her directness seem like an exceptional performance rather than a normal expectation. In other contexts, the semantic level hedging of female authority was also mirrored in the linguistic counter-discourse that was present but was hedged at the narrative level.

What is most significant for the literature from this study is that it is the finding that linguistic counter-discourse is real but structurally limited. It proposes that the difficulty in having Pakistani drama to be linguistically gender-equitable is not only about the stronger and more assertive woman characters in the dramas that say more. It has to do with the overall discourse structure in which those characters' utterances are set, located and judged. A female character may be linguistically autonomous in expressing herself in a language, and be linguistically subordinate to the structures that surround her, to the language of the characters she speaks, and to the honor vocabulary that defines her use of that language as transgression.

5. Conclusion

This article aimed to look at the construction, reinforcement, and – in an emerging and uneven manner – challenge of gendered identities and power relations in the scripts of Pakistani television dramas. It was a central issue that it sought to solve: gendered ideology in the deep structure of Pakistani dramas in terms of the linguistic devices used to embed gendered ideology has not yet been studied systematically and in detail, though the scholarship in the field had been expanding and was becoming quite intricate. It combined feminist critical discourse analysis with a corpus of fifteen drama serials from 2020-2024, and examined the various linguistic levels such as speech act distribution and felicity conditions, address forms and registers, conversational control patterns, narrative voice devices and semantic field of honor and shame to offer an integrated, multi-level analysis that were not available in the existing literature.

The results validate and further enrich the argument of language as a major tool of gender ideology in the Pakistani television dramas. All of these patterns were found to lie in a coherent and integrated system of linguistic features that "legitimize" and "naturalize" gendered inequality in the form of an asymmetric distribution of directive and expressive speech acts, a consistent hedging of women's professional authority, a differential use of honor vocabulary in relation to gendered transgression, patterns of conversational control that reproduce and naturalize domestic power hierarchies, and an asymmetric granting of

narrative interiority that positions audiences to understand male characters from within and female characters from without. This 'naturalization' works most effectively in dramas which at the level of plot question patriarchy, precisely because the progressive content of the narrative and the conservative structure of the language create a gap where ideology can work most effectively, transporting its message as if it were not.

On the other hand, by comparing scripts over the study period, the actual and analytically relevant counter-discursive manoeuvres can be identified, especially in the script language of female autonomy and rights-based assertion, and the collective solidarity, which focus on productions from 2022 to 2024. These shifts are important to note and have received little critical discussion and should continue to be the focus of scholarly attention and critical encouragement of change in the medium. The difficulty they have in achieving linguistic counter-discourse that is not immediately contained and domesticated by the larger narrative and discursive architecture is real and not easily overcome, but not insuperable.

The main take-home message for practitioners and policymakers is that it is important to focus on language, not just on the progressive themes and character types of the story, at the level of the script—deliberately and after a thorough process. A drama can narrate a story about a woman's courage, intelligence and right to autonomy and deconstruct it with the systematic use of linguistic devices that do not assert her, interrupt her voice, suspend her legitimate claims as an act of transgression on honor, and remove her interiority from the story so that her narration remains unintelligible to the audience. Scriptwriting courses, editorial reviews and industry guidelines and codes of practice that recognise and take the linguistic aspects of gender representation seriously are thus important supplements to the current cultural need for more balanced and accurate portrayals of women's lives. In this medium, as in all media, language is never a means to meaning. It's the material that has meaning. It's basically the story itself.

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