

PATRIARCHAL DISCOURSES IN PAKISTANI DRAMAS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT.

Pakistani television dramas are among the most powerful cultural texts that shape and disseminate social meanings in everyday life. Far from being neutral entertainment, dramas function as discursive sites where ideologies of gender, family, and morality are reproduced and contested (Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1997). This article applies Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (1992, 1995) in conjunction with Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2005) to examine how patriarchal discourses are linguistically and semiotically produced in Urdu-language dramas. A purposive sample of prime-time serials broadcast on major Pakistani television networks was analyzed to identify textual patterns such as imperatives, interruptions, lexical choices of honor and shame, and narrative resolutions privileging male authority. The findings indicate that while women are frequently portrayed as obedient, sacrificial, and emotionally dependent, men are represented as decision-makers, rational actors, and moral guardians—an arrangement consistent with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) and institutional patriarchy (Walby, 1990). These textual practices intersect with broader sociocultural structures, including family hierarchies and religious-moral discourses, to normalize male dominance as “common sense” (Gramsci, 1971). At the same time, occasional counter-discourses emerge through resistant female characters and alternative audience readings. The study contributes to CDA scholarship by situating televised fiction in Pakistan as a site of ideological struggle and highlights the need for gender-sensitive media practices that can disrupt patriarchal reproduction.

Keywords

Critical Discourse Analysis; Feminist CDA; Pakistani Dramas; Patriarchy; Gender Representation; Media Discourse; Fairclough.

INTRODUCTION

Television dramas in Pakistan command wide audiences and exert significant influence on public conversations about family, morality, religion, and gender. Popular dramas do not merely mirror social reality; they actively participate in producing it by selecting, privileging,

and legitimizing specific meanings (Hall, 1997). From a critical discourse perspective, media texts are not neutral carriers of information but sites where power relations are enacted and ideological projects are advanced (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993). In the South Asian context—where gender

norms are historically structured by kinship systems, respectability politics, and religious-moral repertoires—patriarchy often appears as “common sense,” embedded in everyday language and practice rather than only in explicit doctrine (Walby, 1990; Lazar, 2005).

This article investigates how patriarchal discourses are produced and naturalized in Pakistani television dramas. It mobilizes Fairclough’s (1992, 1995) three-dimensional CDA model—textual analysis, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice—to unpack linguistic choices and their circulation, and it integrates Feminist CDA to foreground gendered power relations and the politics of representation (Lazar, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity offers a complementary lens for understanding how certain masculinities are elevated as normative and authoritative while others are subordinated or feminized (Connell, 1995). Together, these frameworks enable an analysis that moves from micro-features of talk (e.g., turn-taking, modality, evaluative lexis) to meso-processes (production routines, genre conventions) and macro-structures (family, class, religion, nation).

The problem addressed here is twofold. First, despite robust global scholarship on gender and media, there remains a need for methodologically explicit CDA-based analyses of Pakistani televised fiction that connect close textual work to broader sociocultural formations. Second, because patriarchal meanings are often advanced through apparently “positive” virtues—family cohesion, honor, sacrifice—they may evade critique unless systematically deconstructed (Butler, 1990; Althusser, 1971). CDA is well-suited to this task because it treats discourse as a form of social action with material effects (Fairclough, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

Research Objectives

- To identify linguistic and semiotic strategies through which male authority and female subordination are constructed in selected Pakistani dramas.
- To analyze how these textual strategies are embedded within

production/consumption practices (casting, plot resolution, audience positioning).

- To relate drama discourse to wider sociocultural practices that sustain patriarchy, including honor/shame regimes and respectability politics.

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Research Questions

1. What textual resources (e.g., speech acts, modality, evaluative language, intertextual references) are recurrently mobilized to reproduce patriarchal relations?
2. How do discursive practices (e.g., narrative closure, character arcs, genre interdiscursivity) normalize these textual patterns as “common sense”?
3. How do these media discourses articulate with broader social practices (family, religion, class) to stabilize hegemonic masculinity?
- 4.

Significance of the Study

The study advances CDA scholarship by offering a transparent, replicable analytic protocol for televised fiction in a non-Western context, thereby addressing calls to de-center Euro-American media exemplars (van Dijk, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Substantively, it clarifies how seemingly benign moral vocabularies—obedience, sacrifice, modesty—can function as ideological techniques that limit women’s agency while valorizing masculine authority (Lazar, 2005; Connell, 1995). Practically, it outlines implications for media producers (scriptwriting, casting, dialogue coaching), regulators, and educators seeking gender-sensitive storytelling and critical media literacy.

Scope and Outline

Empirically, the article focuses on a purposive sample of widely watched, prime-time Urdu dramas broadcast on major Pakistani networks in the past decade. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: the literature review synthesizes CDA, Feminist CDA, and media-gender scholarship; the methodology details

sampling, data, and analytic procedures; the findings section presents a multi-layered CDA; the discussion interprets results in relation to theory; and the conclusion offers recommendations and future research directions.

Literature Review

A literature review is a comprehensive survey and critical evaluation of scholarly sources like books and articles on a specific topic, written to establish the context of your research, identify gaps in existing knowledge, and demonstrate your understanding of the field (Ahmad et al., 2023; Maitlo et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2025). It's more than just a summary; it synthesizes and analyzes information from various sources to create a coherent overview of the current state of scholarship on a subject, often serving as a section of a larger research paper, thesis, or dissertation (Ahmad et al., 2021; Maitlo et al., 2023; Maitlo et al., 2025). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged in the late 20th century as an interdisciplinary approach for examining how language contributes to the reproduction of power, inequality, and ideology in society. It assumes that discourse is not a neutral medium but a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes social structures (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). CDA scholars emphasize the dialectical relationship between discourse and society: discourse is influenced by social conditions, and at the same time, it influences those conditions by shaping identities, relationships, and systems of knowledge (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

Fairclough's model of CDA is particularly influential. He proposes a three-dimensional framework that includes the analysis of text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 1995). At the textual level, researchers examine linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, modality, and cohesion. At the level of discursive practice, the focus shifts to processes of text production, distribution, and consumption, which reveal how meanings are constructed and circulated. At the level of sociocultural practice, analysis connects discourse to broader power relations, ideologies, and social structures. This

model is especially relevant for analyzing television dramas, which operate simultaneously as texts, cultural products, and vehicles of ideology.

Complementary to Fairclough's framework, van Dijk (1993) emphasizes the cognitive dimension of discourse, arguing that ideologies are represented in the mental models of social actors. His socio-cognitive approach highlights how language and discourse influence beliefs and attitudes, which in turn shape social practices. In the case of Pakistani dramas, repeated exposure to discursive patterns of male authority and female subordination can normalize patriarchal beliefs at both individual and collective levels. Wodak's discourse-historical approach also enriches CDA by stressing the importance of situating discourse within its historical, political, and cultural context (Wodak, 2001). For Pakistani dramas, this means understanding how legacies of colonialism, Islamization policies, and patriarchal family structures continue to inform contemporary gender representations.

Feminist CDA (FCDA) provides a more specific lens for analyzing gendered discourse. Lazar (2005) argues that CDA must explicitly foreground issues of gender, power, and ideology to uncover how discourse sustains patriarchy. FCDA emphasizes how patriarchal norms are embedded in everyday interactions and how discourses of femininity and masculinity are constructed through language and representation. For instance, the frequent portrayal of women as obedient daughters, dutiful wives, or sacrificial mothers in South Asian media reflects and reproduces patriarchal ideology. Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity complements FCDA by suggesting that gender identities are not fixed but are repeatedly enacted through discursive practices. In Pakistani dramas, this performativity is evident in ritualized dialogues, dress codes, and narrative arcs that reinforce traditional gender expectations.

Global research has established that media plays a central role in reproducing gender ideologies. Goffman's (1979) classic work on gender advertisements showed how visual and textual cues naturalize male dominance and female subordination. Later studies have confirmed

similar trends in television and film, where women are often underrepresented, stereotyped, or depicted in roles centered on domesticity and emotionality (Gill, 2007). Such portrayals contribute to a symbolic environment where patriarchal power is normalized. In South Asian contexts, scholars have observed that television serials frequently emphasize family honor, marriage, and sacrifice as key themes, positioning women as moral gatekeepers of tradition while men are constructed as decision-makers and protectors (Khan, 2013; Siraj, 2010).

In Pakistan, television dramas occupy a unique cultural and ideological position. With high viewership across social classes, these dramas are not only a source of entertainment but also a platform for moral and social instruction (Niazi, 2018). The historical trajectory of Pakistani dramas reflects broader political shifts. During the 1980s under General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies, dramas were required to conform to conservative moral codes, reinforcing gender segregation and patriarchal values (Jafar, 2005). Although the liberalization of media in the 2000s introduced private television channels and diversified content, patriarchal discourses remain pervasive. Popular dramas such as "Humsafar" and "Meray Paas Tum Ho" have sparked national debates precisely because they foreground gendered conflicts and often reinforce male-centered perspectives (Khan, 2020).

CDA-oriented studies of Pakistani media are still limited, but existing work highlights important patterns. For example, Siraj (2010) found that Pakistani television consistently portrays women in stereotypical roles, often linking their worth to marriage and motherhood. Zubair and Zubair (2017) observed that educational materials and media texts alike reproduce patriarchal structures through linguistic strategies such as the use of honorifics for men and silence or omission for women. These findings align with Walby's (1990) theorization of patriarchy as a system operating through multiple structures, including the household, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions. Television

dramas, as cultural institutions, reinforce many of these structures simultaneously.

The interplay of patriarchy and media discourse can also be understood through Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, which refers to the process by which dominant ideologies become naturalized as common sense. Dramas normalize patriarchal power not necessarily by explicitly preaching male dominance but by embedding it in storylines, character development, and moral lessons. For instance, when female characters are punished narratively for pursuing independence while obedient women are rewarded, the drama reinforces the hegemonic message that conformity to patriarchal norms ensures social harmony.

This review reveals three main gaps that the current study addresses. First, while global scholarship has explored gender and media extensively, Pakistan-specific CDA-based analyses of television dramas remain underdeveloped. Second, existing studies on Pakistani dramas often focus on audience reception or content analysis but do not consistently integrate linguistic and discursive methods as CDA does. Third, there is limited attention to how patriarchal discourses intersect with religion, class, and nationalism in Pakistani dramas. By addressing these gaps, the present study contributes not only to CDA and FCDA scholarship but also to South Asian media studies more broadly.

In sum, CDA provides a robust framework for analyzing the linguistic and semiotic dimensions of Pakistani dramas, while FCDA ensures that gender remains central to the analysis. Previous studies demonstrate that dramas are powerful tools for reproducing patriarchal ideologies, but they also hold potential as sites of resistance. This literature review establishes the theoretical and empirical foundations for the analysis that follows, situating Pakistani television dramas within broader debates about discourse, power, and gender.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is the systematic approach, including techniques, tools, and a procedure, that a researcher uses to conduct a study, collect data, and analyzes it to address a research question or problem (Jalbani et al., 2023; Arshad, Ahmad & Zafar, 2025; Yousaf et al., 2025). It provides a logical and valid framework for a study, ensuring that the research aims and objectives are met and that the results are reliable and can be evaluated or reproduced by others (Arshad, Mehmood & Ahmad, 2025; Soomro et al., 2025). This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate patriarchal discourses in Pakistani television dramas. CDA is not a single method but a broad approach that combines linguistic, social, and cultural analysis to uncover the relationship between language and power (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). By focusing on how discourses in dramas reproduce gender ideologies, this methodology aligns with the objective of revealing the hidden mechanisms through which patriarchy is normalized in media texts.

Research Design

Design of the research comprises of the whole procedure which is conducted research” (Ahmad, Farhat & Choudhary, 2022). The research adopts a qualitative design, emphasizing textual and interpretative analysis. CDA is appropriate for this study because it allows for a critical examination of both language and its social functions. In particular, Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of analysis textual analysis, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice serves as the guiding framework. Additionally, the feminist orientation of the study integrates Lazar’s (2005) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which foregrounds gender and power relations as key analytical categories.

Data Selection

For the purposes of this study, three popular Pakistani television dramas were selected: Humsafar (2011), Meray Paas Tum Ho (2019), and Parizaad (2021). These dramas were chosen for three reasons. First, they achieved widespread

popularity and generated intense public debate, reflecting their cultural impact. Second, they represent different time periods in the evolution of Pakistani media, thereby allowing for some degree of comparative analysis. Third, they contain explicit and implicit representations of gender roles, family structures, and moral values, making them suitable for analyzing patriarchal discourse.

Data Collection

Relevant episodes, dialogues, and narrative arcs were identified through purposive sampling. Key scenes were transcribed for textual analysis, focusing on interactions between male and female characters. Special attention was given to recurring linguistic patterns, metaphors, honorifics, and silences. Visual semiotic elements such as costume, body language, and camera angles were also considered, since these features contribute to meaning-making and reinforce verbal discourse.

Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeded in three stages, following Fairclough’s model:

Textual Analysis:

Examination of vocabulary, grammar, modality, and transitivity to uncover how linguistic choices position men and women differently. For example, analyzing the use of imperatives by male characters versus hedging or deferential language by female characters.

Discursive Practice:

Exploration of how dramas are produced, distributed, and consumed. This involved analyzing interviews with scriptwriters and media commentaries, as well as considering the commercial pressures of television ratings and sponsorships that shape content.

Sociocultural Practice:

Linking the findings to broader societal structures, including patriarchy, religion, and cultural traditions. Here, Walby’s (1990) concept of patriarchy and Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony provide interpretive tools for

understanding how patriarchal discourse in dramas becomes naturalized as common sense

Validity and Reliability

Although qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalization, steps were taken to enhance validity and reliability. Triangulation was achieved by analyzing three dramas rather than one, thereby identifying recurring discursive patterns across texts. Credibility was also enhanced through engagement with existing literature, ensuring that findings are situated within broader scholarly debates.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research are principles and practices designed to protect participants and ensure the integrity of the research process and its findings (Rao et al., 2023; Shaheen et al., 2025). Since the study relies on publicly available media texts, no human subjects were directly involved and thus no formal ethical approval was required. However, care was taken to represent the dramas accurately and avoid misinterpretation. The analysis respects cultural sensitivities by critically examining patriarchal discourses without dismissing the complexity of Pakistani society and its diverse audiences.

In sum, this methodology combines CDA with a feminist lens to systematically analyze how Pakistani television dramas construct, reinforce, or challenge patriarchal ideologies. By integrating textual, discursive, and sociocultural dimensions, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between media discourse and gender power relations in Pakistan.

Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the Critical Discourse Analysis of selected Pakistani television dramas, focusing on how patriarchal ideologies are embedded in language, narrative structures, and visual semiotics. The analysis is organized according to Fairclough's three-dimensional model, enriched by insights from Feminist CDA.

Textual Analysis

At the textual level, linguistic choices consistently mark distinctions between male and female characters. Male characters often employ direct imperatives, assertive declaratives, and minimal hedging, reflecting authority and decisiveness (Fairclough, 1995). For example, in "Meray Paas Tum Ho", the male protagonist frequently asserts moral judgment through short, declarative sentences that leave little room for negotiation. In contrast, female characters often use deferential language, hesitations, and mitigated requests, which linguistically position them as subordinate or emotionally dependent.

Lexical patterns of "izzat" (honor) and "sharam" (shame) recur across dramas, most often associated with female conduct. This lexical coupling reinforces the ideological burden placed on women to embody family reputation, while men are framed as its protectors. Such choices sustain asymmetrical gender roles by naturalizing the association between masculinity and control, and femininity and sacrifice.

Transitivity patterns also reveal asymmetry. Male characters are frequently constructed as agents of action, while women are portrayed as passive recipients. In "Humsafar", for instance, the female protagonist's identity revolves around her relational role as a wife and mother, whereas the male character is depicted as the decision-maker. This echoes van Leeuwen's (2008) argument that discourse selectively includes or excludes actors to reinforce power relations.

Discursive Practice

At the level of discursive practice, Pakistani dramas operate within an industry driven by ratings, commercial sponsorship, and audience expectations. Writers and producers often prioritize narratives that align with dominant cultural values to secure viewership. In this way, drama texts are both shaped by and help to reproduce hegemonic norms (Gramsci, 1971).

Intersexuality plays a significant role, as scripts frequently draw upon familiar cultural and religious tropes. References to Islamic morality and family honor are not simply decorative but

serve to legitimize patriarchal authority by embedding it within sacred discourse. As Lazar (2005) emphasizes, feminist CDA must attend to how such intertextualities legitimize gendered inequalities by presenting them as culturally or religiously inevitable.

Audience reception also reinforces discursive patterns. Public discussions on social media, for example, often applaud the moral integrity of male characters while vilifying women who transgress traditional boundaries. This circulation of meaning across media and society strengthens the cultural legitimacy of patriarchal discourses.

Sociocultural Practice

At the sociocultural level, the dramas reflect and reproduce broader structures of patriarchy in Pakistan. Walby's (1990) concept of "private and public patriarchy" is particularly relevant: the domestic sphere is presented as the primary domain of women, while the public sphere, including decision-making and authority, remains male-dominated.

Religious and cultural discourses intersect to naturalize male dominance. In many narratives, men's authority is justified not only by social norms but also by appeals to divine will, thus rendering patriarchal practices beyond question. At the same time, women's obedience is glorified as virtuous and sacrificial, a trope that maintains systemic gender inequalities.

However, counter-discourses are not entirely absent. In "Parizaad", the protagonist challenges conventional masculinity by embodying vulnerability, sensitivity, and moral complexity. Some female characters also resist patriarchal constraints by asserting autonomy, though such resistance is often curtailed by narrative resolutions that reestablish normative gender hierarchies. These moments of disruption suggest that Pakistani dramas are also sites of ideological struggle, where competing discourses of tradition and change coexist.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Pakistani dramas function as powerful ideological tools in the

reproduction of patriarchy. Through linguistic and semiotic strategies, they present gender inequality as natural and culturally legitimate. At the same time, the presence of resistant voices, however limited, indicates that media discourse is not monolithic but contested.

This aligns with Fairclough's (1992) view that discourse is both constitutive and constituted: it shapes social realities while also being shaped by them. In the Pakistani context, television dramas both reflect and reinforce patriarchal structures, yet they also open spaces, however constrained, for alternative gendered subjectivities.

Thus, the analysis underscores the ambivalent role of media: while it remains complicit in sustaining patriarchy, it also has the potential to contribute to social transformation if alternative discourses are given visibility and legitimacy.

Conclusion

This study examined patriarchal discourses in Pakistani television dramas through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model and insights from Feminist CDA. The analysis revealed that patriarchal ideologies are embedded in linguistic choices, narrative structures, and intertextual references that consistently privilege male authority while marginalizing female agency. Lexical patterns centered on honor and shame, transitivity structures assigning men as active agents and women as passive dependents, and narrative resolutions restoring male dominance collectively reinforce gender asymmetry.

At the level of discursive practice, the findings highlighted how drama production is shaped by market forces, cultural expectations, and intertextual reliance on religious and moral discourses. These elements work together to normalize patriarchal values, presenting them as culturally natural and morally justified. Audience reception, amplified by social media commentary, further circulates and legitimizes such portrayals, sustaining patriarchy at a societal level.

The sociocultural analysis demonstrated that dramas reflect broader patriarchal structures in Pakistan, where domestic and public spheres

remain gendered and hierarchical. By aligning men's authority with divine will and women's obedience with virtue, dramas naturalize gender inequality. Nonetheless, the presence of occasional counter-discourses – through resistant female characters or alternative masculinities – signals that dramas are also sites of ideological contestation.

In conclusion, Pakistani television dramas are not merely entertainment but function as cultural instruments of ideological reproduction. They simultaneously reinforce patriarchal values and open limited space for resistance. This dual role underscores the need for media practitioners to adopt gender-sensitive approaches that challenge rather than reproduce inequality. Moreover, future research could explore audience agency more deeply, examining how viewers negotiate or resist dominant meanings. Such investigations would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of media discourse in shaping gender ideologies in Pakistan.

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