

REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY URDU FICTION: FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF NEMRAH AHMED'S NOVEL *JANNAT KAY PATTAY*

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ABSTRACT

The study looks at the image of agency in the popular and contemporary Urdu novel, *Jannat Kay Pattay* by Nemrah Ahmed, whose It is an investigation of the construction, regulation and negotiation of gendered identities in a novel as researched under the lens of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) proposed by Lazar (2007) and Fairclough (1995, 2003) and the fundamental idea of Structuration Theory derived from and advocated by Anthony Giddens (1984). The study uses qualitative textual analysis of purposively selected passages, which enables the identification of six interlocking discursive themes: female agency and decision-making; patriarchal control and family authority; moral policing and surveillance; religious discourse and negotiated agency; competing masculinities; and the negotiation of socially acceptable femininity. The results show that the role of women in the novel is not omnipotent or invisible, but is allowed only insofar as it aligns with religious morality, family expectations, and women's culture. Through the study, the author not only recreates and questions the dominant norms of maleness but also portrays Pakistani women as agents of negotiation who maneuver through social systems rather than merely moving in and out of them. This study makes a valuable addition to the considerable feminist literature on modern Urdu literature. It illustrates the fruitful use of FCDA in the analysis of popular literature in South Asia.

Keywords: Female agency, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Urdu fiction, Structuration Theory, patriarchy, gender, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Literature has always been considered an important cultural institution that forms, negotiates, and gives meaning to social and cultural concepts of identity, morality, power, and social relations. Literary texts do not just reflect reality but also help to construct understandings of the social world by providing particular interpretations of human experiences, values, and relationships. Urdu fiction has contributed to this

process in South Asia and, in doing so, served as a cultural archive and a space for the negotiation of social norms, collective memory, and changing identity over time (Murtaza et al., 2025). There has always been a great debate on the portrayal of women in Urdu literature. During the early and classical Urdu period, women were depicted in Urdu as females who had to be seen as being domesticated, sacrificing, and modest; females

who were responsible for their families (Yaqin, 2025). Women were often portrayed in roles that upheld social norms and gender hierarchies. But with social changes, expanding educational opportunities, urbanization, and new cultural realities, literary depictions of women have evolved to become more varied and complex (Anwar et al., 2025).

Recently, Urdu literature, especially fiction, has been tackling issues of gender, identity, education, religion, and social mobility (Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023). In recent writings, women are often represented as agents of their own lives rather than as objects of social relations (Mansoor & Arif, 2014). But this depiction does not typically suggest a complete lack of social restraint. Instead, in much of the literature, the idea of female agency is presented as negotiated, contingent, and related to broader cultural, religious, and familial norms. In the Urdu fiction of today, therefore, it is possible to have a lot of space for the study of the paradoxical relationship between autonomy, morality, and social control (Saba & Hameed, 2023).

This has been expanded upon by modern tales of Islam in fiction form, which are popular now. These stories might contain concepts of personal growth or change; faith or identity; a moral; and relationships between humans and between males and females, thus making them relevant and relatable to today's audience (Salahuddin, 2021). Language, character, dialogue, and plot help to construct norms of behavior, ideals of femininity, and norms of agency within these works. So the realm of literary discourse is a key arena to analyze the construction, reproduction, and negotiation of gendered identities and gendered power relations.

In the field of gender studies, discourse is given greater attention in explaining social reality. Some feminist academics have said that gender is not just a biological classification but a social construct that is created and perpetuated via language, cultural norms, and the institutions in which they are embedded (Martin, 2004). Literary texts thus provide a solid basis for examining the role of discourse in the formation of femininity, masculinity, authority, morality, and social legitimacy.

In this study, it has been demonstrated that the agency of women in contemporary Urdu fiction is not freedom but freedom that is subject to negotiation and granted conditionally. Female agency is accepted when it conforms to religious and familial norms and to socially acceptable representations of femininity. Yet, it may be challenged or controlled when it contradicts accepted patriarchy. The study seeks to contribute to the broader debate on gender, power, and representation in modern Pakistani society by examining the discourses that shape this context.

Background of the Study

Nemrah Ahmed is one of the most popular and influential novelists in the Urdu genre in Pakistan in recent times. Her novels combine religious themes, personal growth, suspense, romance, and social commentary, making them popular among young adults. Her writing style is simple, her characters are relatable, and her topics often explore themes such as faith, morality, identity, and gender, making her works important cultural documents in modern Pakistani society (Umair et al., 2024).

Jannat Kay Pattay is one of her best-selling novels and holds a unique place in modern Urdu literature. Spread across 866 pages, this novel has thrills, soft romance, moral lessons, and the transformation of a girl, all in one book. Haya Suleman, a student at the International Islamic University, is the protagonist of this novel, whose adventure is marked by learning and experience, family pressure and expectations, religious conversion, questions of identity, and various forms of social control. Haya is not the only character addressing questions of morality, authority, family honor, gender norms, and personal autonomy. The novel's themes have resonated with Pakistani readers and have had a significant impact on Pakistani culture (Kazmi, 2025).

Jannat Kay Pattay is not only a piece of literature but also holds great importance. The novel is a popular text that helps to construct public discourses on femininity, morality, religious devotion, and acceptable behavior (Montpellier, 2019). It offers specific attitudes and meanings about women's roles, responsibilities, and choices

through its story and the interactions between characters. These kinds of representations are significant because literature not only illustrates prevalent social realities but also helps produce and normalize them (Ali, 2023).

While present-day Urdu fiction is very popular, and recent scholarly focus has been on the representation of women, little work has been undertaken so far on the construction of women's agency through discourse in popular Urdu novels (Ali, 2025). Previous research tends to concentrate on themes, characterization, religious themes, or ideology rather than on the linguistic and discursive processes that create gendered meanings (Iqbal & Mahmood, 2025). Likewise, the use of discourse-based approaches in the analysis of modern Urdu fiction is not extensive (Amjad et al., 2025).

This dichotomy is especially significant in the novel *Jannat Kay Pattay*, as the issues of agency, morality, religion, familial power, and gender expectations permeate the narrative (Arshad et al., 2024). A study of how these themes are constructed within the language provides a better understanding of how they regulate and negotiate women's behavior. For this reason, the present research aims to explore how female agency is discursively constructed in the novel *Jannat Kay Pattay*, with attention to the interaction among gender, power, morality, and social structure (Ali, 2025).

Literature Review

Since its origin, Urdu fiction has been a significant part of the culture that allows for negotiation of social values, social identity, and power relations. Novels are not simply a form of entertainment. Still, they have also dealt with issues of society, culture, and ideology, which is a reflection of the changing nature of South Asian societies. In recent years, the importance of Urdu as a medium of collective identity, culture, norms, and values has been highlighted (Saleem et al., 2025). In the same way, Murtaza et al. (2025) argue that the Urdu novel is a product of cultural discourse that reflects the social setting and is integral to processes of cultural, moral, gender, and social identity. Urdu fiction is an important field of

study of gender identity and social norms in the modern era.

The depiction of women has always been an important issue in the study of Urdu literature. Urdu fiction mostly portrayed women in a domestic domain and as subjects of patriarchy, emphasizing them as subservient, sacrificing, and family-responsible women. But lately, Urdu fiction has begun to depict smart women who can assert varying degrees of independence, from mild to strong (Khan, 2019; Iqbal, 2020). Scholars have noted the changing scenes as signs of broader shifts in Pakistani social norms, particularly regarding education, employment, and public space. But in the realm of women's autonomy, it is not often depicted as free and boundless. Instead, women's choices are often shaped by notions of family honor, cultural norms, and social acceptability, leading to a complex dynamic of agency and conformity (Iqbal, 2020; Safdar & Yasmin, 2023).

In today's Urdu fiction world, religion has a special importance. The themes of faith, morality, identity, and gender began to be woven into Islamic fiction as it became popular (Safdar & Yasmin, 2023). In many cases, the term "religious involvement" refers to a process through which personal change, moral development, and growth occur. Conversely, religious discourse produces 'normative' images of 'femininity', modesty, and social 'appropriateness'. Religious values have been described as both empowering and regulating women; these values have been said to provide women with moral power and behavioral limitations (Hassan, 2017; Safdar & Yasmin, 2023). Thus, in modern Urdu fiction, religion is not only used as a tool of oppression and liberation, but also as a tool of negotiation; gender identity and social needs are negotiated at all times.

In recent years, the study of gender in Pakistani literature has employed a discourse approach. For this purpose, Ali et al. (2025) used the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) approach to examine the representation of women in beauty discourse in Pakistan's literary works, revealing that women have been described with adjective-based constructions such as beautiful, delicate, and elegant. They conclude that language is a

major aspect in the normalization of patriarchal ideals because it presents women as objects of beauty and admiration. The study also suggests that women themselves internalize these discourses as a means of reproducing patriarchal ideology in the daily lives of women.

Likewise, research on Pakistani fiction from a discourse perspective has been carried out in the context of female agency and male power. In the study *Meri Zaat Zara-e-Benishan* by Ghilzai and Maaz (2024), the author actively challenges societal limits and does not allow the patriarchy's oppression to dominate his life completely. The results they produce reveal some of the ways female characters try to maintain selfhood and agency within limiting social contexts. Khan and Dar (2021), however, provide a more critical interpretation of the same novel and argue that the story of female suffering can be seen as reinforcing patriarchy by leading women to "embrace injustice as their social fate." In their study, they propose that texts may, at the same time, be ambivalent to women and reinforce traditional gender hierarchies through subtle discursive features.

Continuing support for the utility of discourse analysis in literary analysis is provided by Shakeel and Shaheen (2024), who employ Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze Khadija Mastur's *The Women's Courtyard* and *A Promised Land*. Their research shows that the selection of words, metaphoric language, symbols, and grammatical structures is highly important in the creation of gendered power dynamics. The authors suggest that female characters navigate oppressive social norms in ways that defy or contest dominant patriarchal norms and, through discursive practices, regain agency within constrained contexts. Their results support the idea that literary discourse is a crucial space in which power, resistance, and identity are negotiated. These studies as a whole prove that modern Pakistani literature is very sensitive to gender issues, power, identity, and social control. They also identify the importance of discourse-oriented strategies in revealing the subtle linguistic devices by which genders are created and sustained. However, the scholarship to date has largely been on issues of the victimization of

women, talk of women's beauty, women's resistance, and women's subalternity. In contrast to the limited focus on how women's agency is being created in contemporary Islamic fiction through the intersection of religious discourse, moral regulation, family authority, and patriarchal power.

In the study of Nemrah Ahmed's *Jannat Kay Pattay*, this gap is more apparent. Although the novel has been immensely popular and influential among Pakistani readers, very little research has explored the role of language in shaping women's agency and regulating gendered behavior. In light of this gap, the present study aims to explore how women's agency is discursively constructed, negotiated, enabled, and constrained in the interplay among the three fields of religion, morality, and patriarchy in *Jannat Kay Pattay*.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Structuration Theory by Giddens (1984), which provides a useful framework to understand the relationship between individual agency and social structure. Giddens questions the 'separate spheres' approach to the social and human aspects of business. Rather, he maintains that social life is created through the ongoing interplay of agency and structure. Individuals act in social contexts, and social contexts are reproduced or transformed by persons' actions. The relationship is conceptualized as a duality of structure, in which structures serve as both the medium and the product of social practices (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992).

As far as the present study is concerned, structure refers to the broader social and cultural frameworks that shape women's lives, including religious values, norms, family expectations, and the accepted role of women in Pakistani society. They are locations that develop lines separating right from wrong for women. Agency is the ability to be female characters, to make choices, express preferences, negotiate constraints, and act in or against them.

Structuration Theory is important for analyzing *Jannat Kay Pattay*, as the dichotomy between the oppressed and the empowered does not account for the novel's female characters. Their choices are

not limited by the religious, familial, and patriarchal lives of human characters like Haya and Ayesha Gul. Their behavior towards the other person can range from negotiation, resistance, and accommodation to compliance. The theory permits the study to be interpretive instead of an analysis of total agency and total subordination.

The method of analysis used in the study is Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which looks at the representation of relations within the text. As for developing, maintaining, and contesting gendered power dynamics, language is a concern for FCDA (Lazar, 2005, 2007). It considers discourse a social construct that can shape, naturalize, and question ideologies. In this perspective, however, literature is not a neutral report of events but rather a discursive domain in which meanings are continually created and negotiated with regard to gender, morality, authority, and social behavior.

The present study uses Fairclough's (1995, 2003) notion of discourse to examine how the novel employs narrative description, character utterances, lexical and evaluative expressions, and repeated discourse patterns to portray female agency. It is an emphasis specifically on the significance of language in the creation of ideas about femininity, moral obligation, family honor, religious fidelity, and the superiority of men. It seeks to identify, in this way, the underlying mechanisms of the discourse that restrain, enable, or regulate women's actions.

The complementarity of Structuration Theory and FCDA is observed in this study. Structuration Theory provides the sociological context for the discussion of agency in relation to structure; FCDA provides the analytical tools for analyzing the process of structuration as constructed through language and discourse. In other words, Structuration Theory explains what is happening in terms of the interaction between agency and structure. At the same time, FCDA explains how this interaction is represented and legitimized in the text. The two frameworks offer a full view of female agency in *Jannat Kay Pattay*, which encompasses both social structures and structures of discourse, the processes through which social structures are reproduced, negotiated, or even contested.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research, as part of the study's design, was supplemented by text analysis of the novel *Jannat Kay Pattay*. The study employs a qualitative research approach to examine how meaning, identity, and social relations are created through language and discourse. This study adopts a qualitative method to describe and discuss the processes of representation and negotiation of agency within religious discourses and patriarchy. An analysis of the language and verbal interactions in a text could help explain how it conveys these gendered meanings.

The primary source of information used for the present study is the novel *Jannat Kay Pattay* by Nemrah Ahmed. This study does not analyze the novel in its entirety but only parts relevant to the research objectives, using purposive sampling. The passages selected are illustrative of major instances of gendered interaction, of moral control, of religious discourse, of patriarchy, or of female agency.

The characters studied are Haya Suleman and Ayesha Gul, and the experience is based on the various forms of female agency in the narration. They are based on their interactions with male characters - family, authority figures, and other influential characters. Emphasized are aspects of learning, movement, family authority, moral judgment, religious change, decision-making in professional life, and the negotiation of social expectations.

This study is underpinned by Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration, and its main analytical approach is Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). Structuration Theory provides a general sociological theory of agency and structure, and FCDA provides a framework for considering how agency and structure manifest in language and discourse.

The analysis is carried out in relation to the three-dimensional model of discourse proposed by Fairclough (1995), which considers the three components: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The key points of focus at the text level include lexical choices, evaluative phrases, metaphors, labels, narrative descriptions, and dialogue. The study explores the discursive level of the production and circulation of meaning as

realized in interactions between characters. Discourse patterns are interpreted at the social level in relation to other larger structures like patriarchy, religion, family authority, and gender norms in Pakistani society.

The following discursive patterns and theme concerns were coded into the different passages. Coding was used to address the research questions within the theoretical framework. After reading the novel, the relevant themes have been

identified as 6 broad themes. Selection criteria included:

- Gender dynamics where power is exercised or challenged by female and/or male characters.
- The sense in which the decision-making role of women is highlighted
- Statements of social control, moral policing, and strategic resistance were registered.

Table 1: Thematic Coding Framework for the Analysis of Female Agency in Jannat Kay Pattay

Theme	Description	Novel Scene
Female Agency and Decision-Making	Expressions of autonomy, education, mobility, and independent choice	Haya`s negotiation to Turkey, joining her father`s business
Patriarchal Control and Family Authority	Male authority structures, family hierarchy, and gendered regulation	Taya`s objection on her joining business, Haya`s Childhood Nikah
Moral Policing and Surveillance	Social evaluation of female behavior through honor and reputation discourse	Blackmailing on Dance Video
Religious Discourse and Negotiated Agency	Intersection of faith, morality, and female subjectivity	Haya`s choice for veil and family reaction on it
Competing Masculinities	Multiple and conflicting forms of male authority and support	Condemning as well as supporting from male characters as Abba and Jihan
Negotiation of Acceptable Femininity	Discursive construction of socially approved womanhood	Repetition of Achi Larkian (Good Girls) in Novel

The coding process identified patterns that helped to elucidate gendered identity, social expectations, and power dynamics in the narrative. The analysis was done in four steps. The passages to be marked were identified after close reading of the novel. Secondly, these passages were coded, with special categories developed for the study. Third, using FCDA, the features of language and discourse, such as lexical choice, labeling, metaphor, evaluation, and dialogue form, were analyzed. Finally, the results were analyzed using Structuration Theory to understand how agency in the practice of gender was constituted, challenged, negotiated, and resisted within a social structure. The study focused on how acceptable and unacceptable female behavior is represented in the construction of language, how this representation

legitimizes patriarchy, and how the role of the female character involves interaction with narrative structural constraints. As a researcher working in Pakistan's socio-cultural landscape, I understand that broader social experiences and cultural understandings influence perceptions and interpretations of gender, religion, and morality. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process as the popularity and influence of 'Jannat Kay Pattay' in the current discussions of femininity, faith, and identity were vividly reflected. The study does not aim to assess religious beliefs and moral values contained in the novel. It does, though, intend to explore, through discourse, the process of constructing and negotiating religious meaning and moral values in the novel. This reflexive position enabled

interpretations to be grounded in the text rather than on the author's personal interpretations.

Reliability and consistency in analysis were ensured through systematic coding applied across different passages and themes. Both narrative description and character dialogue enabled triangulation within the text, so it would not be possible to draw inferences from individual instances. This study involved only published literature; there was no risk of harm to humans and no human participants. Evidence from the novel has been used to support all textual interpretations, and appropriate academic referencing has been used throughout the study.

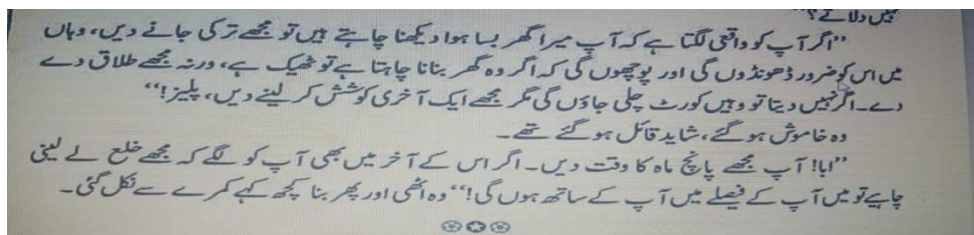
Discursive Analysis: Construction of Female Agency

The agency of women in Jannat Kay Pattay is not an obvious and fixed reality. It rather becomes a space for negotiation and renegotiation, a discursively formed and continually contested agency. The text builds a complex landscape through its six interconnected thematic formations, in which women are present and, in one way or another, contest the social structures around them. These theories of FCDA and Structuration Theory inform the analysis of each theme, documenting the interweaving of power, morality, and gendered expectations in the novel's language and logic (Giddens, 1984; Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2007).

A Scholarship and a Struggle: Female Agency and the Architecture of Permission

One of the most important foundations of women's agency in Jannat Kay Pattay is the constant tension between what women want and the rigid frameworks to which they must conform. Female agency is not a simple outcome of the novel but a process that must be negotiated, established, and controlled. One of the most significant chapters of this is Haya's being granted a scholarship to study in Turkey, as shown in the novel. At face value, this achievement can be viewed as a tally of good luck and ability. But it is clear from the text that the scholarship should not be equated with free movement or independence of decision-making. Ultimately, the choice is in the hands of Haya's father, one who dictates agency for women, but not in all instances (Ahmed, 2009; Mansoor & Arif, 2016; Waheed et al., 2025).

The remarkable thing about Haya's conversation with her father is not that it is a dispute; it is a negotiation. However, Haya does not question her father; instead, she works within his authority, offering him a deal: she will use the time in Turkey to decide the issue of her childhood Nikah to Jihan, and if it does not work out, she will accept her father's resolution. Strategic agency is not giving way to the current social structure; it is agency, an appropriate action done in an existing social structure (Giddens, 1984; Azim et al., 2025; Nafees & Hasnain, 2025). This kind of agency is called a "strategic context analysis" by Stones (1991), for in such an agency, agents' behavior is modified in response to their structural resources and constraints.



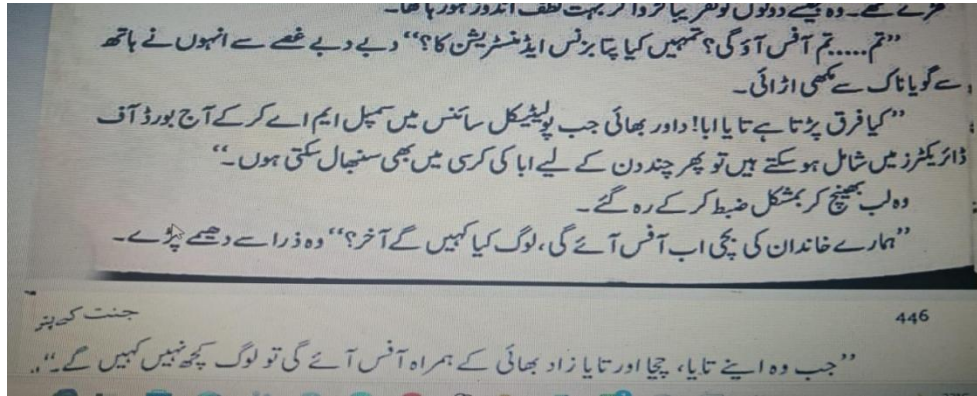
(Ahmed, N.2013, P. 56)

Translation: "Haya: If you really want to see me happy as married then let me go to Turkey, I will find Jihan and ask him if he wants to not, coming back to Pakistan I will accept your all conditions".

The importance of this chapter lies in how it reflects the social reality of many women in contemporary societies in South Asia – that they are highly capable, educated, and motivated, but

they always have to fight the odds in order to receive the final approval from male guardians (Hassan, 2017; Iqbal, 2020). Agency is not absent; rather, it is shaped by the social structures that govern women's lives and influence the range of choices available to them. The scholarship is a great success, and the way it was negotiated exemplifies the texture of living gendered power. The dynamic is strengthened as Haya goes into her father's business affairs after he gets sick. She

enters the fields of social life traditionally considered the province of men, holding a power of attorney and assuming substantive decision-making authority. The resistance she faces comes not from her legal authority or her competence but from her gender and the social implications of women's presence in the professions in the public sphere (Manzoor, 2018; Khan, 2019).



(Ahmed, N. 2013, P.446)

Translation: "You will come to the office? What do you know about business? What will people say?" Log kya kahen ge? Shines a light on the fact that it is not about professional ability; it's about the family and social status. People will talk about what they are going to say," can be interpreted as a social control, the community as a self-regulating entity. For instance, this statement can be viewed as an illustration of the social common sense of everyday language, which attests to the process through which gender normativity becomes entrenched in it (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2007; Amjad et al., 2025). But Haya will not back down. She's not passive or rebellious; she's assertive and strategic in answering. She introduces the relationship between agency and structure, which lies at the heart of social life, with conviction and, in doing so, illustrates their interplay in Structuration Theory.

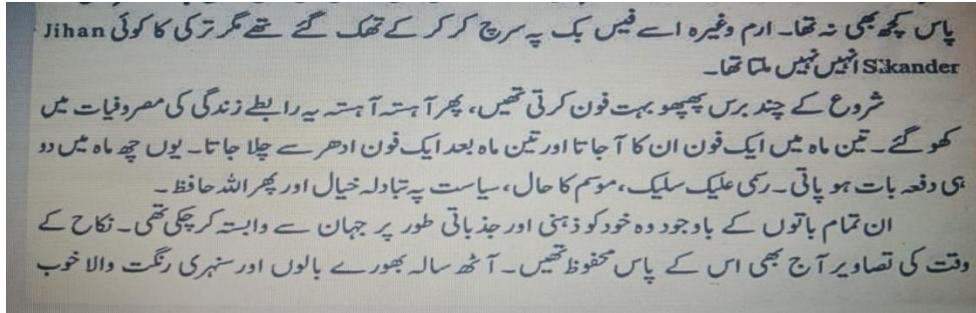
The Weight of the Wali: Patriarchal Control and the Governance of Women's Lives

The novel offers several examples of female agency but also unflinchingly casts a light on the

omnipresence of patriarchal power. It is not altogether obvious but rather intrinsically shaped through the rule of custom, social norms, and cultural norms of accepted female behavior, and is therefore both imperceptible and powerful. Rather than being called coercive, it is disguised as caring, tradition, and moral obligation (Butler, 2011; Khan, 2015; Mansoor & Arif, 2016).

The most basic example of patriarchy in the novel is the marriage of the two children, Haya and Jihan, as played out in the nikah that occurred when they were one and eight years old. The father, therefore, has the authority to make this life-changing decision before Haya can decide what she wants and make her voice heard. However, what is analytically important is simply the arrangement, but not the long-term impact on Haya's adult subjectivity. Though she is not formally related to Jihan, she quickly becomes emotionally attached to the relationship and opposes its termination. However, its patriarchy is never imposed but reproduced through the normalization of its conditions: the woman's internalization of the desire for patriarchy has

been created through this normalization (Hassan, 2017).



(Ahmed, N. 2013, P.29)

Translation: “In starting few years Phupho used to call frequently then gradually those phone calls were reduced. Then their contact with family remained once in a while. In spite of all this, Haya was mentally and emotionally attached to Jihan”. One of the most interesting aspects of patriarchy that the novel identifies as its subject is this process of internalizing. Indeed, the process of internalization is how gender norms are reproduced, as Butler (2011) argues: When people repeatedly perform gendered expectations, they make them seem like an expression of individual choice rather than a social imposition. Assume that the father also has authority over her marriage; the transaction does not take away that authority; it is reproduced in her own emotional involvement with it, making a marriage look like her own. This illustrates Giddens's (1984) term “practical consciousness”, by which social structures are reproduced without being questioned or reflected upon (Clegg, 1986). Similarly, in the way Haya faces up to her father's responsibilities in the business when his role as father is assumed, this process of naturalization is evident. Having legal authority to act, she meets gendered resistance from male relatives, not because they feel she is incompetent, but because of her gender. Invoking the discourse of “log kya kahen ge” is rhetorical in nature, and it appeals to an imagined community acting as a policing agent that shapes the conduct of women in the absence of a coercive apparatus. Community judgment, whether actual or expected, maintains family gender inequality by itself enforcing the “shelter”

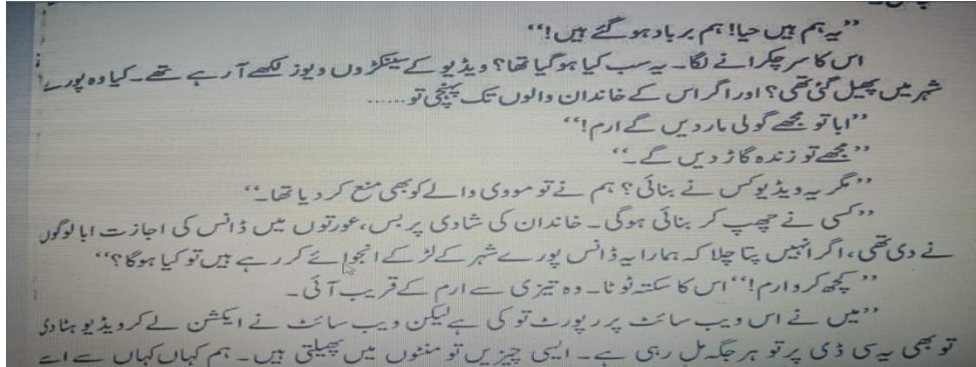
of women in the family (Taj, 2024; Amjad et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2025).

The Gaze That Never Sleeps: Moral Policing, Social Surveillance, and the Architecture of Shame

One of the most sensitively crafted aspects of the novel's gender analysis is its consideration of how women's actions are governed by overt force as well as by the ubiquitous mechanisms of moral policing and ‘social surveillance’ that regulate women's behavior. Women in this novel are not only allowed to engage in different kinds of behavior; they are also constantly judged by those norms, and these judgments have social and emotional consequences for both women who do and do not adhere to them, as well as for women whose actions violate them. The critical thing about this surveillance, which does not require an ‘eye’, is that it is the internalization of the watching eye itself (Ahmed, 2009; Manzoor, 2018; Waheed et al., 2025).

In this regard, the most instructive chapter concerns a marriage-dance video of Haya circulating on social media under the heading ‘Shareefon ka Mujra’. There was no misinterpretation of the dance during its performance. It was in the context of a family event and addressed the family. Labeling the video with a moralistic rubric changes its meaning altogether. There is no change to the act; it is just the discourse that has shifted, where a domestic celebration becomes a day of shame and dishonor. This is the power of social labeling, which is borne out by its accuracy: it is not what occurs that

matters, but how it is named and communicated in social discourses (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2007).

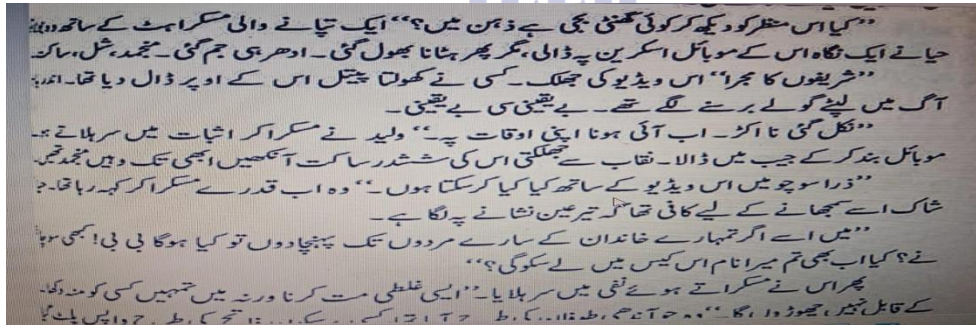


(Ahmed, N.2013, P. 37)

Translation: “We are done Haya. Abba will shoot us. He will bury us alive”.

Haya seems to be upset by the dissemination of this video, for the right reason, because she is not afraid of what happens in it; she is afraid of who it will be shown to and what it will be interpreted as. Harm is discursive before material. Waleed Leghari then uses it as a tool of blackmail in this

self-regulatory way. The social importance of women's honor as a form of control is what gives him his leverage, not something physical. The blackmail is therefore a type of domination of women which manifests in the social weaponization of the discourse on honor, respectability, and moral femininity (Rafiq, 2021; Taj, 2024).

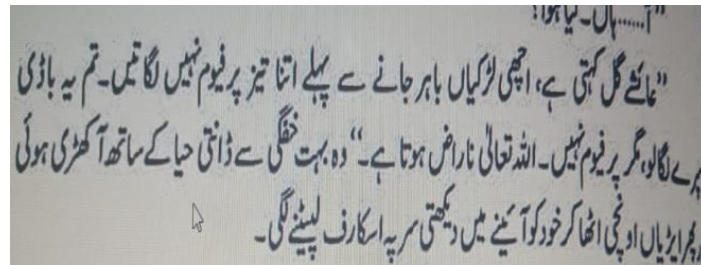
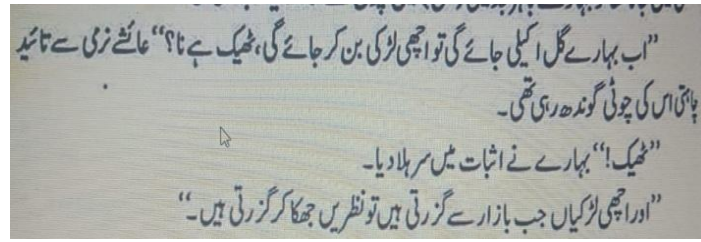


(Ahmed, N. 2013, P.674)

Translation: “Waleed: Did you recall this video? I have this and I will make it viral if you didn't take my name out from the police case”.

The theme of moral control is continued through the character of Ayesha Gul, whose strictures on 'achi larkian' specify explicit norms of appropriate femininity. Her statements on the immorality of wearing perfume, talking loudly, or public

exposure of her hair constitute discursive practices that create and ensure the limits of acceptable femininity. The term 'achi larki' serves as an exercise of “naturalizing certain social norms” (Fairclough, 1995) by placing them in the context of what Butler (2011) refers to as the “moral language” of the common sense (Cameron, 2007).



(Ahmed, N. 2013, pp. 303- 304)

Translation: “Good girls keep their eyes low when going outside. Good girls don’t use perfume when going outside”.

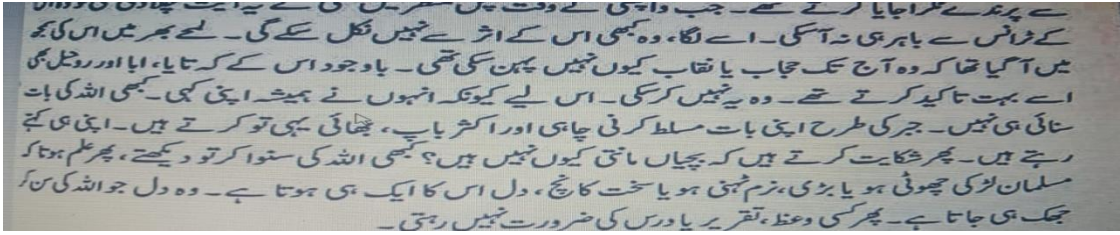
Importantly, these norms are voiced by a female character, conveying the message that male authority is not the only means of transmitting patriarchal ideology; it is also transmitted through women's discourses. The process of these statements spreading beyond the novel into social media is also noteworthy, as it shows that literary texts, even beyond readers, can also become part of the larger cultural formation of gendered norms, thus extending their regulatory effects from the space of reading to everyday social life (Mansoor & Arif, 2016; Montpellier, 2019; Nafees & Hasnain, 2025).

Veil and Voice: Religious Discourse, Moral Agency, and the Complexity of Faith

In the narrative context of this novel, one of the most seemingly complex points of religion exists. It is not a simple tool of control, nor is it a simple source of agency, but rather a negotiated space where agency is both afforded and limited.

Religion, viewed as a living, inhabited discourse, is always reconfigured in the meanings it gives, present in various social and personal contexts, where the novel refuses a reductive binary in which religion was oppressor or liberator (Hassan, 2017; Rafiq, 2021; Taj, 2024; Azim et al., 2025).

Perhaps the most profound example is the conversion of a woman named Haya to hijab. Haya, a confident, modern woman, decides to wear the Hijab of her own will in Turkey. Male family members do not make the decision; instead, some react ambivalently and worry about how others will see them. Haya's insistence in the face of this reaction, and her ability to articulate and explain the value of her decision, define the hijab less as an imposed rule and more as an individual voice within a religious context. In challenging the reductive assumption that women's religious observance is the obverse of external pressures and influences, the chapter offers another key way in which women can exercise agency to some extent: through religious observance as a mode of choice (Ahmed, N., 2013; Mansoor & Arif, 2016; Safdar & Yasmin, 2023).

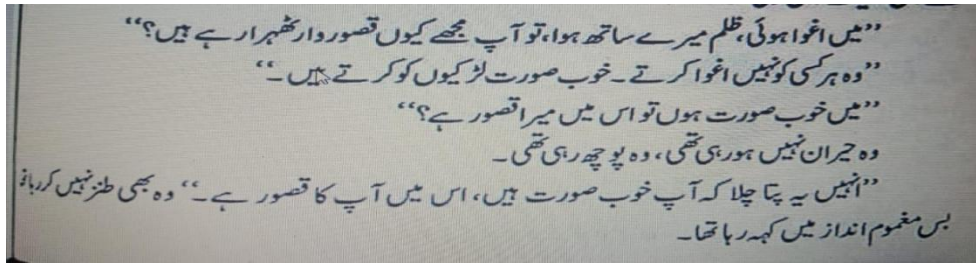


(Ahmed, N. 2013, P. 383)

Translation: “Haya: Now she understood that whenever Taya, Abba or Rohail (Her brother) asked her to take veil, why she couldn’t do it because they always tried to force her rather than convincing her by the Quranic verses”.

Alongside this, the text also contains links between religion and the norms that ought to be embodied by women, which are more ambiguous in their implications. What Jihan said occurs

analytically when Haya is kidnapped and abused in Turkey, and her appearance and visibility are partially involved in what her sufferings were. At the same time, it is a speech between Jihan and Haya. However, whether or not Haya may be beautiful is her fault is a direct challenge to the rationality of victim-blaming, and the exchange as a whole does not fully resolve the tension it poses (Taj, 2024; Nafees & Hasnain, 2025).

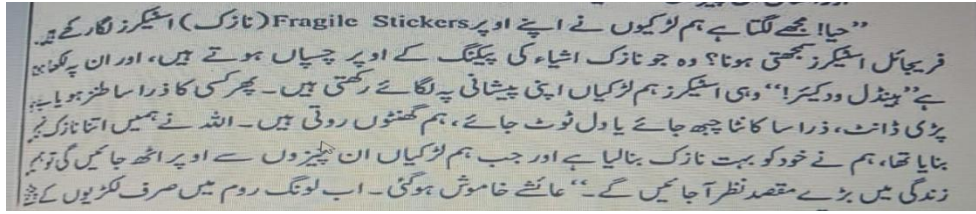


(Ahmed, N. 2013, P. 289)

Translation: “Haya: I was kidnapped, I was abused, why you are blaming me for this? Is being beautiful my mistake? Jihan: The kidnappers got to know about your beauty, this is your mistake”

It is striking from the FCDA's point of view that this speech in some ways masks the moral responsibility of offenders by projecting it onto victims, and is emblematic of conceptual linkages between women's safety and the control of their appearance and visibility in the wider culture. The displacement is not condoned in the novel, as there is some internal resistance for Haya. Any reference, however, that this logic emerges within the text, and is not definitively contradicted by the

narrative, is itself a testament to the persistence and normalization of this thinking across the cultures that the novel refers to and resides in (Lazar, 2007; Khan, 2015; Mansoor & Arif, 2016). The character of Ayesha Gul adds another layer of religious complexity. She is a voice for modesty and morality, and for challenging notions of fragility and dependence in women. This is an extended metaphor of women as objects bearing a “Handle with Care” label, and one that takes on new meaning as the dualism of religious and moral language is shattered (Ahmed, N., 2013; Rafiq, 2021; Safdar & Yasmin, 2023).



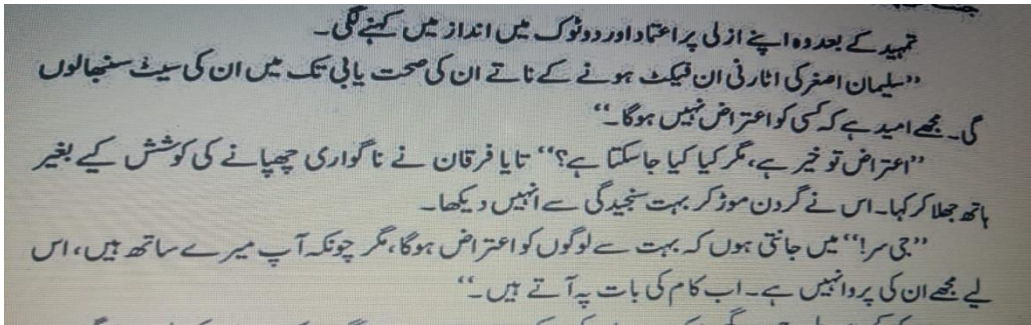
(Ahmed, N. 2013, p. 285)

Translation: "Ayeshe Gul: Haya! I think we girls have pasted Handle with care stickers on us. We assume ourselves so fragile, that is why we feel so hurt because of whatever other people say".

Not All Men Are Walls: Competing Masculinities and the Negotiation of Female Agency

During this analysis, one interesting and important observation is that the male characters in the novel are not a monolithic block of a single

individual and essentially same-minded fatherhood, which imposes patriarchy at all times. Rather, a few, sometimes competing, definitions of masculinity are presented, and female characters are given varying degrees of access and restriction according to these definitions. In a discourse of oppression or liberation of the latter, in these competing masculinities, there are also feminisms that are no less recognizable (Mudasir et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2025; Waheed et al., 2025).



(Ahmed, N. 2013, P. 452)

Translation: "Haya: Being Attorney in fact of my father, I will take over his seat in his absence. I hope nobody has any objection. Taya (feeling irritated): Yes we have objection but what can we do".

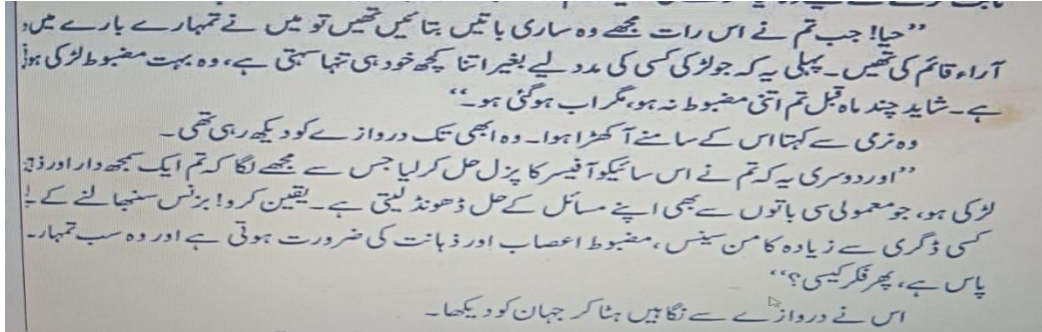
When it comes to limiting and regulating women's spheres of action, Taya Furqan and his sons stand as a perfect example. The objections of the others to her involvement in the business sphere hinge not on her apparent abilities but on implicit notions of her proper sphere. The most dangerous patriarchal power in the story absolutely is that of Waleed Leghari—by playing on the heightened social value of a woman's reputation, he masters blackmail and intimidation of his female subjects. In these characters, masculinity is a social dominance that is located in the containment of

females, which Butler (2011) refers to as compulsory reproduction of heterosexual gender in social performances.

The novel also has characters (men) who are active in supporting and enabling female agency. Haya's father also enjoys parental rights. He treats his daughter with the confidence that she can manage her affairs far from home, a confidence that eventually leads him to entrust her with the administration of his business. His power does not stifle her power; it is necessary to her power. Jihan's character is also not polarized in either direction, as some of his thoughts are rooted in conservative beliefs. In contrast, others are clear expressions of his support for Haya's character, her strength, her courage, and her independence, and he continues to urge her to control herself. The

novel also brings in other supporting characters who complicate the gender matrix - indeed, Haya's brother and Jihan's grandfather are included here, each of whom treats women with as

much respect as he accorded himself, and each of whom was an active participant in family and social life (Iqbal, 2020; Azim et al., 2025; Nafees & Hasnain, 2025).



(Ahmed, N. 2013, p. 447)

Translation: "Jihan: Haya! The girl who can face so much in her life alone, is definitely strong enough. You are intelligent and wise girl. You can solve your problems and can definitely handle your father`s business".

Competing masculinities suggest that the novel does not seek to construct a monolithic patriarchy. Instead, it envisages multiple power dynamics, in which female agency is facilitated and simultaneously developed through a variety of modes of power exercised by male actors. The results correspond to the theoretical basis of Structuration Theory, which acknowledges that social structures are neither incompressible nor all-encompassing, but are contingent and set possibilities for action that do not exhaustively predict outcomes (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). The novel, then, demonstrates women's agency as a negotiation in which women encounter various entities of authority, support, and resistance, not necessarily through a confrontational or accommodating relationship with patriarchal power.

Discussion

The findings of the current study confirm that Jannat Kay Pattay is a discursive field in which female agency is not an inherent, predetermined feature but rather a site of continuous negotiation between individual subjectivity and social structure. Possibilities for women's agency are present in all five thematic formations found in

the analysis, yet with each of them, a portrait emerges of women's agency as real, but conditional; as meaningful, but regulated; as constrained in each of its manifestations by social, cultural, and religious contexts in which it is deployed. It is a finding that is strongly picked up with the concept of Giddens' Structuration Theory (1984), which states that agency and structure are not conflicting but cannot be separated: in the novel, agency and structure are linked together—women's agency is within and through structures as they act in them, and act, in doing so they recreate and slightly change the structures.

In relation to this first research question, which asks how women's agency is constructed and negotiated through language, narrative voice, and lines of dialogue, the analysis shows that the more general concept of agency is constructed discursively in the novel rather than through explicit statements of freedom or defiance. In particular, moments are created for Haya in her discourse with her father, where she demonstrates agency through language in the context of their exchanges about the Turkey scholarship, her refusal to bow to her father's wishes and instead attend college to pursue her career, and her arguments about the meaning behind her choice to wear the hijab. These moments are also highlighted in Butler's (2011) concept of gender performativity, which helps to explain the repetition and variation of gendered speech acts

and their role in reiterating and contesting the norms of women's conduct.

Themes of religious discourse and moral policing provide the most direct answers to the second question about the relationship between religious and moral discourses and their effects on gender norms and expectations in the novel. The analysis shows that religious language is not only ambiguous in the text but also serves to enhance women's agency and to restrict it as well. Haya's chapter on hijab theorises religion as a tool for self-determination and independent decision making (Rafiq, 2021; Safdar & Yasmin, 2023) while the victim-blaming logic that emerges in the wake of her abduction explicates the manner by which the religious and moral framework serves to shift responsibility and control the visibility of the woman. "achi larki" conduct is another example provided by Ayesha Gul for how moral and religious norms serve as discursive instruments of surveillance, which mediate and produce and enforce specific understandings of appropriateness of femininity (Hassan, 2017; Montpellier, 2019). All of these findings reinforce the literature, noting that religion in popular fiction in South Asia is not a single, uniform force but rather a multiple, contested space where gender norms are continually negotiated (Taj, 2024; Azim et al., 2025).

It is difficult to answer the third question, i.e., the novel's reproduction, negotiation, and challenge of patriarchal power relations, as the novel does all three at once. The wali, the verbally powerful 'log kya kahen ge', the blackmail of a woman's reputation, and the self-perception of women in the story are the micro elements of patriarchy. These are established through Haya's strategic and persistent insistence on her capabilities and decisions in existing familial configurations. They are also challenged, though to an extent, as the novel offers active and reflective female characters rather than subjects under male authority (Mansoor & Arif, 2016; Khan, 2019; Iqbal, 2020). This multiplicity has its own importance; it means that gender relations are a lived, complex experience in contemporary Pakistan, and are neither fixed by patriarchy alone nor merely the product of patriarchy, but are negotiated on an everyday basis between people and families.

To focus on the construction of "acceptable" behavior for women, especially through dialogue and narration, this study analyzes certain types of speech acts, evaluative language, and narrative positioning in response to the fourth research question. Almost the entire novel portrays the women through their adherence to moral and social values, with the voices of characters such as Ayesha Gul, who examine the subject, as well as Haya's internal voice, coming through. It constructs a norm, and this norm is always being applied to understand what kinds of actions are considered appropriate versus inappropriate in terms of being a woman, a "normative framework" in which the actions of women are constantly measured and evaluated (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; Cameron, 2007; Jan & Rahman, 2022; Amjad et al., 2025).

One of the most significant findings of the research is that the discursive construction of female agency is regarded as the given. One of the significant findings of the analysis is that agency is a prerogative of women and is produced discursively. This, however, repeats Mansoor and Arif's (2016) argument that women's voice is authorized within a set of cultural parameters in the current era of Pakistani Urdu poetry, and Nafees and Hasnain's (2025) assertion that women's voice is largely dominated by "strategic agency" in the case of Pakistani Pashtun women's fiction. This pattern is presented in Jannat Kay Pattay in a more complex fashion because the conditions of permission are not necessarily uncontroversial or agreed upon, and the terms of permission depend on the moral or religious conceptualization as well as on the relational context in which they are issued. The image of gendered power is dynamic and negotiated throughout the novel, mediated by actors and social contexts (Giddens, 1984; Stones, 1991; Sewell, 1992).

The study reveals that there is no single, uniform concept of masculinity in the novel; rather, it is plural and pluralistic, thereby expanding the scope of existing scholarship on gender in the Pakistani novel. The binary male understanding of gender in Urdu literature is both enabled and constrained by male characters, and this study uses Jannat Kay Pattay to illustrate this. This finding also has

implications for the theoretical framework of the study, as it shows that social structures, such as patriarchal authority, are not systems that are a single, uniform whole, but are multiple, intersecting, and potentially contradictory, in line with Sewell's (1992) argument that structural constraints are always plural, intersecting, and potentially conflicting.

Lastly, the results of the study shed light on the overall meaning and significance of popular Urdu fiction in terms of its representational capacity as an arena of cultural production and ideological contestation. *Jannat Kay Pattay* is not just a love story; it is a sustained discussion of some of the most salient issues in today's Pakistan: gender, religion, family, and Social Change. The popularity of the novel among the general audience, especially young women, indicates its influence on and representation of popular notions of agency, moral womanhood, and opportunities for women in Pakistan's modern era. In Urdu fiction, this role is most certainly alive and active in contemporary popular fiction, and this paper provides ample evidence for that. Yaqin (2022) says that Urdu fiction has always been a space for negotiating social norms. The creative use of the FCDA and Structuration Theory in this text, which has otherwise been insufficiently understood through rigorous analyses like these, shows they have potential as analytical tools to explore popular literary forms, not just what is said but how and why it is said, by someone, and as a social act that it performs. The application of the FCDA and Structuration Theory to this text, particularly if it serves more as a demonstration of the value of applying these analytical frameworks to popular literary forms, not only in terms of what is said but how, why, by whom, and as a social act that does what.

Conclusion

The present work was conducted using an integrated approach that combines Structuration Theory and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the portrayal of female agency in Nemrah Ahmed's *Jannat kay patay*. The research analyzed how gendered identities and relations are discursively produced, considering discourses on female agency, decision-making, patriarchal

control, moral policing, religious discourses, and opposing masculinities, and focusing on the scrutiny of selected passages from a set of texts strategically chosen based on the themes presented in this research.

The results show that the women's agency is neither absent nor unlimited in the novel. Women are not simply passive victims of patriarchy but rather are negotiable agents, the opportunities, choices, and expressions of their authority continuously negotiated by other social contexts and structures such as family, religion, culture, and institutional positioning. The novel demonstrates women's ability to attend school, maintain professional jobs, voice their opinions, and always function within societal structures over which conditions prevail.

In addition to being expressed in the more obvious way, the novel's example shows that forms of patriarchal control are numerous and even subtle, such as the family hierarchy, reputational discourse, moralization, and the internalization of social norms. The "good girl's" mantra of "good girl" conduct, "family honor", and "public reputation" shows how power is perpetuated when a seemingly routine communication and exchange occurs but is not directly enforced in the here and now.

The religious dimension is a truly complex component of the discourse that emerges from the reading, with the capacity for women to exercise agency while simultaneously restricting it. There is no religious utopia or dystopia in the novel, but rather a constantly contested space through which different conceptions of womanhood, morality, and female agency are discussed. The ambiguity is echoed in the scholarly arguments on religion and gender in Pakistan in general.

The novel makes an interesting contribution to the study by highlighting that the concept of 'masculinity' is not uniform. There are various kinds of male authority, some of which are constraining, and others are liberating. Each of these, among the multiple and intersecting power relations in which female agency is embedded, creates a complex landscape. This discovery challenges reductive perspectives on gender relations and highlights the need to consider the differentiated nature of social structure.

Future Implications

Results from this study offer a few avenues for future study. Other Urdu novels of the period could be analyzed to further document the portrayal of Agency in women, particularly in relation to patriarchy, religiosity, and morality across various writers and narrative styles. A comparative study could help determine whether the negotiation of women's roles is a general trend in contemporary Urdu fiction or a unique characteristic of Jannat Kay Pattay.

In the future, FCDA's features could be used to analyze Pakistani TV dramas, e-fiction, and social media discussions about popular Pakistani novels. Popular culture texts have a powerful effect on public discourses on gender, morality, and femininity, and analyzing these texts offers a broader understanding of how gender norms are produced and circulated in Pakistani society.

The study also suggests the need for further research on religious discourse in women-centered fiction. Future researchers can investigate the role of religion in literary and media texts in terms of empowerment and regulation. This can contribute to a rebalanced perspective on representations of religion, gender, and women's subjectivity in the production of South Asian cultural works.

Last but not least, it has certain implications for feminist literary criticism, Gender Studies, and Urdu literary studies. It establishes that popular fiction as a genre should not be considered simply romantic or entertaining reading. Rather, these can be valuable contexts for reading, interpreting, and analyzing reflections of social values, gender roles, and evolving conceptions of women's roles in modern Pakistan.

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