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**A Critical Discourse Analysis of Stereotypical Presentation of Lead Roles
in Pakistani Urdu Digest Stories**



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Abstract

Urdu digest stories are still a popular genre of literature in Pakistan and they are an extension and confirmation of traditional gender ideology. Such stories commonly depict both men and women in stereotypical ways that shape the views of the readers on gender, power and identity. The Present research is a critical analysis of the discursive techniques that Urdu writers of digests use to develop the stereotypical male and female protagonist and how such representations are affecting the perceptions of emotions and social perceptions of the young people in Pakistan. Ten Urdu digest stories published in 2020-24 were thematically analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within the analysis of Fairclough (1995). Emphasis was put on the linguistic aspects, gendered metaphors and a narrative structure that strengthen the hierarchy of gender. Findings indicate that the male characters are positioned as rational, dominant and savors whereas the female characters are portrayed as emotional, dependent and sacrificial. This research concludes that Urdu digest stories are perpetuation of patriarchal discourse which may affect gender identity development in Pakistani youth.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Stereotypical Presentation, Lead Roles, Pakistani, Urdu Digest Stories

Introduction

The language does not only express ideas but it also creates social reality (Fairclough, 1995). In Pakistan, where social arrangements are enshrined in gender hierarchy, the media and literature have a central role in perpetuating and replicating the ideologies (Van Dijk, 2006). A popular example of a cultural text that influences the popular attitudes to the ideal womanhood and male manhood is Urdu digest stories, which are popular magazines like Shuaa, Kiran, Pakeeza and Aanchal. These digest stories tend to confuse morality with romance and they portrayed gendered ideals that reflected male expectations (Lazar, 2018).

There is a depiction of women as being emotional, self-sacrificing and morally pure and men as being rational and authoritative and dominant in most stories (Arooj, et al., 2022). These depictions help to propagate the idea that male dominance and feminine subordination are inherent and should be. Due to the huge following among young adults and housewives, these digests play a great role in shaping the perceptions of gender roles which is being imagined and internalized in the Pakistani society (Kiani et al., 2023).

Although, Urdu digests have become especially popular culturally, their ideological and linguistic construction of gender has not yet received much scholarly focus. The recently conducted studies on gender based in Pakistan have mostly concentrated on television dramas, advertisements or news media (Said & Ullah, 2025). Nevertheless, the discursive femininity and masculinity of digest stories are still practiced in shaping social attitudes with most of them being propagated with stereotypical ideals which foster psychological and social struggles among the young people. Thus, this study, critically examines the ways in which Urdu writers of digests use linguistic and discursive strategies to formulate stereotypical gender identities and how the images

portray youth in Pakistan in terms of emotional and social lives.

Research Objectives:

To identify the discursive strategies employed in Pakistani Urdu digests to construct stereotypical male and female lead characters.

To know how the digest writers represent femininity and masculinity in their writings

To analyze the emotional, personal and social conflicts and traumas arise in Pakistani youth in relation to the ideal representation of lead roles in Pakistani youth

Research Questions:

What discursive strategies are employed in Pakistani Urdu digests to construct stereotypical male and female lead characters?

How do the digest writers represent femininity and masculinity in their writings?

What emotional, personal and social conflicts and traumas arise in Pakistani youth in relation to the ideal representation of lead roles in Pakistani youth?

This study has theoretical and social importance. It serves the purpose of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by using the framework by Fairclough (1995) to the literature discourse of Urdu language- a field that has been overlooked in linguistics. Revealing the mechanisms of normalizing gender ideologies in everyday fiction, this study helps people to be aware of how subtle wards of operating patriarchy are. It also presents application implications to educators, linguists and media producers who seek to promote equal gender images in Pakistani literature and the Pakistani media.

The study is limited to the textual analysis of ten Urdu digest stories which were published in the popular magazines in the period between 2020 and 2024. It omits reader reactions, interviews with the author or visual representations. The emphasis is kept on the linguistic and discursive images of gender and their social connotations to the Pakistani young people.

Literature Review

Discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis and Gender

The theory of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has a strong theoretical contribution to the analysis of the role of language to reflect and reproduce social relations of power (gender in particular). The three-dimensional model developed by Norman Fairclough (text, discursive practice, social practice) is still basic (Fairclough, 1995). The scholars of CDA believe that language decisions (lexical, grammatical, rhetorical) are not neutral; they reflect ideologies that can be used to propagate inequalities (Van Dijk, 2006; Lazar, 2018). The theme of feminist CDA is how femininity and masculinity are constructed in discourses to perpetuate a patriarchal system (Lazar, 2018).

Media texts (newspapers) (Arooj et al.,2022), dramas (Kiani et al.,2023) and advertisements (Said & Ullah, 2025) have been analyzed in the Pakistani context using CDA. As an example, Arooj et al. (2022) consider the gender stereotypes in both English and Urdu newspapers and show how print discourse establishes gendered roles by using words and setting the topic. Equally, Kiani et al. (2023) examine the use of language by the female character in Pakistani dramas and reveal how the language elements, tag questions, lexical hedges and polite expressions place women in an indecisive or inferior position. Through these studies, CDA proves to be effective in revealing slight discursive processes of gender construction in Pakistani

media.

The Pakistani Media and its Popular Culture in the Depiction of Women

In Pakistan, a lot of studies have been conducted on the portrayal of women in television play, films and print media with continued stereotyping and marginalization. As an illustration, in representation of women in Pakistani primetime dramas has been discovered that Pakistani dramas portray female characters as housewives, victims or moral instructors and seldom as agents (Shahzadi et al., 2023). The study observes the systematic marginalization of female voices by the means of narration and dialogic strategies.

In film, this shift in the role of women has also been studied over the last few years: despite the previous Pakistani cinema of the 1990s representing women as docile and dependents, more empowered roles are sometimes depicted in the new films, although in many cases, the stereotypes of gender persist (Sadiq et al., 2025). However, even these more liberal works are more of a gradual shift which is commonly mediated by the use of moral narratives or the tropes of victimhood. Advertisements and print media also promote the stereotypical images of women. The analysis of newspapers covers demonstrates that women are commonly objectified, pushed to the domestic realms, and depicted in passive positions (Ullah et al., 2019; Ul Huda & Ali, 2015). Women are depicted in submissive positions in newspaper pictures; they are concerned with the looks or household chores (Said & Ullah, 2025). Collectively these studies imply that in most forms of media, women representation in Pakistan is more often than not limited by the discursive rules that prioritize the male agency and contain female subjectivity.

Gender Ideology and Patriarchal Discourses in South Asia

The discursive reconstruction of gender in Pakistani media is incorporated into the wider traditions and cultural norms of patriarchy in South Asia. The stress on izzat (honor), family responsibility and adherence to norms of modesty is a strong force that shapes the representation of gender in cultural texts. In the literature by women, subjectivity has been suppressed by the mainstream narrative even in Urdu. The translational and literary studies are one example of how feminist identities are mediated by the Urdu translations and narratives, which can be tamed to align with the existing moral orders (Shaheen, 2021). Ismat Chughtai, *Lihaaf*, the Urdu short story, is still a forerunner in inactivating female silence and erotic agency within an oppressive moral framework (*Lihaaf*, 1942/anthologized). The difference in literature criticism concerning Urdu fiction is the fact that women characters are frequently forced to internalize what society wants or are bound by male authority (Mehmood et al., 2021).

These patriarchal discourses are the means of cultural common sense, these are hardly discussed directly and reproduced indirectly in narratives, idioms, and moral frames.

Media, Youth and Gender Norms Internalization

One crucial area of your study is the internalization of discursive gender norms by the youth. The mediated socialization principle in media studies implies that young audiences develop a certain belief, expectations and perceptions towards themselves as a result of constant exposure to gendered narrative in media. Dramas and prints in Pakistan have been examined in regards to their impact on the youth gender attitudes.

As an example, Shahzadi has stated that the television drama audience can internalize their normative gender expectations through the membership of their narratives (Shahzadi et al., 2023). Textbook biases in the educational texts can also be involved in creating initial gendered thinking. The Tale of Textbooks by Kumar (2025) is an example that applies CDA to show that elementary English textbooks in Sindh are disproportionate in terms of male professional roles and marginalize female agency. Such a discursive space prepares young readers to believe in gendered hierarchies at early age.

Literature Voids and Applicability to Urdu Digest Fiction

Though, the literature on Pakistani media (dramas, films, newspapers, advertisements) is extensive, little empirical literature is available on the Urdu digest fiction. Among women and young people, digests (romantic serials, short stories) enjoy a huge following but have not been carefully studied at all. The plot elements present in the digest stories romantically conflict, moral trial, family dishonor are echoed in more studied forms of media but the peculiarities of the digest storytelling that were present in the digital format (long storylines, repetition, addressing the reader with his or her sensibilities) present an excellent source of critical research. The other gap is reception of the audience and reader agency: the way in which the readers negotiate, resist or internalize the digest discourses is poorly studied. Also, most of the currently available works have concerned representation (who says what, what roles exist), less on discursive strategies (e.g., modality, metaphor, transitivity) that generate meaning—particularly in Urdu fiction. These gaps are addressed in present research that focuses on applying the method of CDA and thematic analysis to Urdu digest stories and revealing the discursive options of constructing lead roles and exploring their influence on the emotional and social reality of the youth. The media and literary scholarship perspectives give us theoretical foundations and frames to compare, yet your emphasis on digest fiction give the area novelty and very particularity.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study has used a qualitative research design that is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the stereotypical representation of male and female lead characters in the Pakistani Urdu digest stories. The use of qualitative research is justified by the fact that it allows interpreting linguistic, ideological, and sociocultural patterns deeply (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Created by Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (2006), CDA offers the structure of revealing the ways in which language in texts reproduces, constructs and maintains gender ideologies and social relations of power. The study is also designed to discover the features of the language as well as explain their socio-cultural significance in the context of the Pakistani gender discourse.

Data Collection

The corpus of data to be used in this study is 10 Urdu digest stories that were published in popular Pakistani digests (Shuaa, Kiran, Pakeeza, and Khaufnak) between 2020 and 2024. These digests have been specifically chosen due to their popularity, linguistic diversity and readership by a large number of young people and women in Pakistan. The chosen stories are characterized by the male and female

characters who play the leading role and whose image is based on the romantic, social, and moral problems which makes the stories appropriate to examine the stereotypical gender constructions. The reason why purposive sampling was employed is that it enables the researcher to identify texts that most effectively describe the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion criteria were: (1) the presence of both a male and a female lead character in the story; (2) that the story had covered in some degree the issue of gender roles, family values, or emotional issues; and (3) that the story had appeared in Urdu digests accessible to a variety of audiences within Pakistan. The stories were transcribed, translated (where necessary) and coded to undergo linguistic and thematic coding.

Analytical Framework

The three-dimensional model of CDA used in this study is that of Fairclough (1995):

Textual Analysis:

It is used to reveal how gender is ideologically framed, linguistic features including transitivity, modality, evaluative adjectives and metaphorical speech expressions are identified.

Discursive Practice:

It analyzes of production, distribution and consumption patterns of Urdu digests, with the writer, editors and readers components in the process of reproduction of gender ideologies.

Social Practice:

It connects the findings of the text to other patriarchal, cultural and moral discourses, dominant in Pakistani society.

Besides CDA, thematic analysis was applied based on the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2019) process to classify the emergent patterns of gender representation. Ideal womanhood, heroic masculinity, sacrifice and submission and romantic redemption were some of the themes that were inductively determined using the data. The combination of CDA and thematic analysis provided both micro-linguistic and macro-discursive information, which guaranteed the methodological triangulation and the depth of interpretation (Nowell et al., 2017).

Data Analysis Procedure

This was done through several readings of the texts in order to get the researcher acquainted with the linguistic undertones and the contextual undertones. NVivo-assisted coding was done manually on each story to follow the linguistic repetitive signs of power, emotion and gendered agency. Transitivity patterns (who does what and who does it) and modality (certainty, obligation) as well as lexicalization (use of adjectives and verbs to indicate gender bias) were analyzed in terms of sentences and paragraphs. These micro-features were subsequently decoded against the macro-discursive themes, and it is seen how femininity and masculinity are constructed and reproduced in the moral, emotional and familial perspectives, discursively. The researcher ensured reflexivity through the process to reduce researcher bias. In the cross-checking of the interpretations, they were compared to feminist CDA principles (Lazar, 2018) and the available literature on the topic of gender discourse in Pakistani

media (Kiani et al.,2023; Arooj et al.,2022). This rigor of interpretation increased validity and credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis

Theme 1: Idealized Femininity: Virtue, Beauty and Sacrifice

Throughout the digest stories, female characters are always viewed in a three-fold of virtue, beauty, and sacrifice. The ideal woman is created as being morally pure, selfless and being emotionally guarded. Masoom (innocent), shareef (virtuous) and nazuk (delicate) are some of the adjectives used linguistically to highlight fragility and purity.

Narratively, heroines must remain honorable and emotional in the family even when confronted with injustice and betrayal. As an example, a common hero or heroine is faithful to a disloyal husband or resignedly accepts oppression which represents the supremacy of personal faith. Such repetitions make up an archetype of the ideal woman whose value is not based on agency or accomplishment but rather on obedience and chastity. Such propagation of the idealistic myth is echoed in the feminist CDA argument of Lazar (2018), she argues that media texts tend to reproduce the patriarchal ideologies through the framing of women as the moralizing centers instead of as independent agents. Therefore, Urdu digest fiction, is a cultural process of ensuring the passing of traditional expectations of womanhood, and in making the headstrong that good women obey their family and social structures.

Theme 2: Hegemonic Masculinity -Authority, Rationality and Control

In line with the idealized woman, the male protagonist is positioned as the personification of power, reason and dominance. The role of the male protagonist is usually that of a decision-maker, savior, or a reformer. He knows better, he protects or he forgives and thus he establishes his control over the realm of emotions and moral sphere.

The men in these tales are linguistically described using words like taqatwar (strong), hoshiyaar (intelligent) and ba-himmat (brave) and zimmedar (responsible). Assertive modalities in the form of commands, declarations and confident tone are the characteristics of the dialogues and they portray masculinity as equivalent to certainty and control. This is in agreement with the hegemonic masculinity theory of Connell (2005) which states that cultural discourses maintain the power of men by employing dominant and emotionless representations of the masculine sex. Even when a male character does something wrong, e.g. being arrogant or dismissive, even in Urdu digests, a heroic transformation is dramatized by his subsequent repentance or realization. The story thus ensures his centrality and superiority. This discursive practice makes patriarchal leadership seem a natural and even desirable structure in relationships and family relations a normalized aspect of the digest fiction.

Theme 3: Emotional Strength as a Badge of Women Strength

Another similarity in stories is a repetitive theme of the exaltation of emotional perseverance as a specific type of female power. Male characters are characterized by control; the way they make rational choices, whereas women are glorified because of their ability to endure pain without complaints. Women characters who do not give up in abusive marriages or unrequited love are shown as virtuous people. Tears, heartbreak and waiting are turned into signs of strength. In the same breath, a female

character that endures years of inattentions by a husband is finally paid off by reconciliation, which implies that perseverance is moral success. This theme is related to the idea of ideological control by van Dijk (2006) because discourse defines cognitive constructs of what is socially constructive. The stories of the digests instruct that a woman is more powerful through her endurance rather than resistance. As a result, emotional pain becomes moralized, which does not allow women to doubt injustice.

On a larger sociocultural scale, such rhetoric is correlating to Pakistani focus on female modesty and family stability in general, making silence as a virtue and a survival method.

Theme 4: Redemption through Suffering

The other predominant theme is the redemption and transformation, through suffering especially to the characters of females. Plot lines tend to portray heroines as ethically challenged by betrayal, loss or humiliation. Whatever it is, they are practically always rewarded with marriage, forgiveness or divine approval, which in turn supports the notion that moral purity is certain to make them happy in the end. Conversely, male characters, who make their own wrongs, infidelity, arrogance or cruelty are redeemed through their recognition instead of their punishment. Their redemption is described as being self-discoveries, and that of women, as submission and sacrifice.

This unequal moral reasoning is a reflection of the concept of Fairclough (1995) that social inequality is naturalized through discourse by being entrenched in moral and emotive accounts. These texts continue to uphold a gendered moral economy in which suffering is the currency of virtue through romanticizing endurance and forgiveness. In addition, there are also intertextual allusions to religious and cultural ideals, such as *sabr* (patience), *izzat* (honor), and *taqdeer* (destiny) which also legitimize gendered suffering as an order of God. The woman body and feelings are made places of moral writing; personal trauma is transformed into a cultural anticipation.

Theme 5: The Young Perception and the Youth Internalization of Stereotyped Ideals

The concluding theme is the influence of these digest stories on the emotional and social perception of the Pakistani youth. According to interviews and secondary literature, young female readers tend to relate to the digest heroines and absorb standards of patience, modesty, and subordination. The tales are used as reference points to the interpretation of relationships, morality, and self-esteem. However, male readers find the presented heroic masculinity aspirational, and equated control and decision-making with affection and leadership. As a result, the digest stories are a source of gendered social cognition, in which emotional inequality is normalized and romanticized.

This theme is consistent with socio-cognitive approach that van Dijk (2006) uses to explain the effect of repetitive discourse on shared mental model. By the regular intake of this fiction, young people cultivate cognitive patterns according to which femininity is compliance and masculinity is command. The outcome is a slight reinforcement of the patriarchal ideology via pleasure reading. Therefore, what seems to be an innocent romantic novel becomes a social pedagogy of behavior gender. Thematic patterns are an aspect of the verbal learning process that should be discussed as they can be positively or negatively impacting the learning process. It

can be discussed as the aspect of the verbal learning process which can have a positive or negative influence on the learning process. When combined, these five themes demonstrate a consistent ideological framework that is contained in Urdu digest fiction. The narratives are cultural scripts that train gender identities by emotionally convincing stories.

The interdependence of themes is cyclical. It has idealized that femininity needs to be checked by hegemonic masculinity; endurance in emotion will guarantee the redemption in suffering; these are the two patterns which will be internalized by the youth readers and replicate the patriarchal norms. The central part of this process is played by language. The uninterrupted use of metaphor (e.g. women as flowers, men as protectors), modality (orders vs. requests), and evaluative adjectives (strong/weak, pure/impure) creates an unequal order of symbols. Urdu digest stories represent and maintain the gender ideology of Pakistan through this discourse.

Findings and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the chosen Urdu digest stories showed that there were five overarching themes, namely, idealized femininity, hegemonic masculinity, emotional endurance, redemption through suffering and internalization of gender ideals by the youth. Collectively, these motifs reveal that Urdu digest fiction is an effective ideological machine that unexplainably naturalizes gender hierarchies of patriarchy by framing narratives using emotionally convincing language.

These research results depict that the female heroes are invariably portrayed as ethical, emotional and sacrificing people whose goodness is in silence and persistence. This is in line with the findings of Lazar (2018) who argues that the discourse of patriarchy tends to place women in the center of the moral sphere of the society and limit their autonomy. The ideal femininity that is created in the Urdu digests praises purity, obedience, and modesty and identifies the social worth of the women in their relationship and domestic aspects. These kinds of depictions restrict the interpretive room of the female gender to think about themselves as autonomous or assertive subjects.

On the other hand, male protagonists represent hegemonic masculinity which is in charge of control, reason, and emotion. Hegemonic masculinity is perpetuated via representations, which as Connell (2005) and Reeser (2019) observe, connect and equate manhood to leadership and authority. The digest stories are the place where emotional detachment of men is not described as insensitivity but as wisdom, which supports the idea that manliness is synonymous with calmness and control. The perception of discourse as the location of power found by Fairclough (1995) is quite obvious in this situation because the dominance of male voices in linguistic terms contributes to the lack of equality in gender-based relations in the symbolic level.

One of the important discoveries relates to the moralization of female suffering. The aestheticization of emotional pain, betrayal and social humiliations as moral testing resulting into redemption is reminiscent of the argument by van Dijk (2006) who states that discourse can manipulate the social cognition by framing inequality as virtue. The naturalization of female hardship in the digest stories revives the socio-cultural focus of *sabr* (patience) and *izzat* (honor) and transforms gendered pain into an acceptable social act. Besides, the study identifies the effect of these texts on the emotional and social cognition of the youth. The subordinate principles of femininity, where patience is equated to strength, and obedience to love, are internalized by

young female readers, and dominance of heroism and making decisions are associated with male readers. This justifies the fact that Pakistani popular media acts as a moral pedagogy and develops shared gender ideologies (Rafi, 2020). In such a way, the digests are ideologically reproduced as van Dijk (2018) argues that the constant repetition of patterned discourse results in the formation of stable mental models, which uphold social inequality.

Altogether, the results prove that Urdu digest stories are not only entertainment; they are cultural continuity and gendered ideology carriers. They promote patriarchy by idolizing subordination and rewarding obedience, and they are also discouraging critical thinking. Discourse of love, virtue and morality, which appears to be apolitical, is made a delicate instrument of social control. Such results point to a lack of more inclusive and progressive literary stories in Pakistani popular fiction- stories that portray women and men as equals in emotional and social agency but not symbolic bearers of traditional gender expectations. The research could further be extended to this question in the future to television serials or online romantic fiction to track how the digital media perpetuates or challenges these ideological constructions.

Conclusion

The current study has critically analyzed how the gender stereotypes are created and reproduced in connection with language, narrative and ideological means by means of the Pakistani Urdu digest stories. It examined the discursive representations of femininity and masculinity through a critical discourse and thematic analysis of femininity and masculinity, as well as the impact of these representations on the attitude and emotional interpretation of gender roles among the young. The results show that Urdu digests are not simple emulations of social values but active forces in reproducing the patriarchal discourse by implementing the small narrative mechanisms and linguistic symbols. The female heroes in the tales are shown as an embodiment of the goodness, sacrifice and innocence. They are very strong in their emotional perseverance and patience rather than independence and decision-making. This portrayal secures conventional beliefs of Pakistani women as baby makers and saviors of family honor. Male protagonists, in their turn, are created as rational, strong, and seemingly unemotional, the creators and defenders of social order and their authority. According to Connell (2005) and Reeser (2019), such representation recreates hegemonic masculinity which justifies the dominance of males as natural and desirable.

Digest stories accept gender inequality through romanticized accounts in which female suffering has been aestheticized and silence has been glorified as moral strength. This is in line with the feminist CDA view by Lazar (2018) that discourse in the popular media tends to cover up the feminine power of patriarchy in moral and emotional narrative. The digests work as an instrument of the ideological control, as they reinforce the cognitive and moral framework of readers according to the norms of patriarchal society, which is in line with the model of ideological reproduction as proposed by van Dijk (2018). Additionally, the results indicate that there is a generational issue, that these gendered ideals are absorbed within Pakistani youth, and largely by the young women, as a truth of relationships. The heroines of romanticized submissiveness and the heroes of authoritative role shape the perception of love, respect and self-identity of the youths who read them. Such media discourse as Rafi (2020) mentions works as a form of a moral pedagogy, which teaches gender

hierarchy to its viewers disguised as a cultural narrative.

To sum it up, Urdu digest fiction serves as a cultural space where the gender ideology is replicated by means of emotionally laced narratives with the virtue equated to conformity. To transform the literature culture to a more equitable place, Pakistani writers and publishers have to rebuke these ingrained depictions through providing more varied and empowering narratives that support the realities of the modern gender. It should be furthered in future research to digital and televised fiction where the changing patterns of readership might support or challenge these conservative discourses of gender and identity.

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