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Discursive Construction of Women's Modesty (*haya*) in Pakistani Twitter Discourse



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Abstract

This study examines the discursive construction of women's *haya* (modesty) in Pakistani twitter(X) discourse using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The main focus of the research is that how language constructs the meanings of gender, religion and morality especially in the context of language, power and ideology relationship. The study is based on qualitative interpretive design where **130** publically available tweets in the time frame between the years 2020 to 2026 collected through keyword base searching. In order to strengthen the analysis some corpus-based techniques are applied using **Voyant tool** so that recurring lexical items and collocation patterns could be identified. Findings show that modesty is not represented as personal spiritual choice instead it is represented as a defining marker of female identity, sign of religious obedience, and condition for social respect. Through repeated lexical association, moral labeling, religious references and cultural binaries discourse construct the modesty not as optional but compulsory. Here power does not directly operate through force but through normalization, public evaluation and symbolic regulation. Women's bodies are positioned as the site for moral judgment and national identity, those women who deviate from modesty norms face social shaming and moral labeling. Overall, this research demonstrates that social media is discursive arena where ideologies are not only expressed but also reproduce and negotiate through everyday language use. By applying CDA it seems clear that digital discourse in contemporary Pakistani society shapes and maintains gendered power relations.

Keywords: Women's Modesty (Haya), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Gender & Power Relations, Social Media Discourse (Twitter/X)

Introduction

In Pakistani society the ideas about women behavior, dressing and public presence are shaped by culture, religion and moral expectation. Among all these the concept of *haya* (modesty) holds the central position. In Pakistan *haya* (modest) is not understood as personal or spiritual quality but as visible marker of honor, respect and religious commitment. In many Muslim societies, women are positioned as symbolic carriers of collective identity and moral boundaries (**Ahmed, 1992**). As a result the discussions about women's dress, hijab convert into the wider debate of religion, culture and national identity. In this era, as we see the rise of social media platform i.e Twitter, the debates about gender and morality are now shifted in online visible spaces. Social media does not only reflect the society but also shape and circulate meaning, here discourse continuously circulates and people reinforce or challenge the ideas through language. Through repeated statements, labels, and judgments, users construct particular mindset of what is "normal," "moral," or "deviant." As argued by Michel Foucault (1978), discourse produces knowledge and regulates social behavior by defining acceptable and unacceptable identities. In this context the phrases such as "be-haya women," "Western culture," or "modern girls" are not just neutral descriptions but the linguistic tools that frame femininity and morality. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) especially in the work of Norman Fairclough (1955) emphasized that language is interconnected with power and ideology, language is not

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only the tool of communication but also a medium to exercise power. When certain words are used repeatedly they normalize the ideology. In Pakistan Twitter discourse *haya* (modesty) is often link with religious obligation and national authenticity and deviation is associated with moral decline and western influence. These representations reflect the ideological tension between traditions and modernity.

Although the previous researches study the gender and Islam from the political and historical perspective ,but there is limited focus on how the language use of ordinary users in everyday digital and social media interaction linguistically construct the idea of *haya* (modesty). Moreover, there is a need to examine not only the content or what is being said, but how language itself becomes a site where power and ideology operate. This study addresses this gap. This research applies CDA to selected Pakistani tweets from the year 2020 to 2026. Along with close qualitative reading corpus assisted tools are also used so that repeated lexical items and collocation patterns could be identified. With the combination of interpretive analysis and computational support this study investigate that how language construct women's modesty, how power operate through labeling and religious authority and how ideology is normalize in digital spaces (social media). In this way this study shows that online modesty debates are not only self-opinions but a structured discursive practice that reproduce, reinforce or sometime challenge the gendered power relations.

Research question:

How is women's modesty (*haya*) discursively constructed in Pakistani Twitter discourse, and what does this reveal about the relationship between language, power, and ideology?

Research Objectives

- To examine how women's modesty (*haya*) is discursively constructed in Pakistani Twitter discourse.
- To investigate how power operates through normalization, moral policing, and symbolic regulation in digital discourse.
- To examine the relationship between language, power, and ideology in shaping gender norms on Pakistani social media.

Literature Review

Scholarly debates on women and modesty in Muslim societies has been focused on religion, gender and power relationships. Early feminist scholars often interpreted the practices like veiling as the symbol of patriarchal control. For instance, **Leila Ahmed (1992)** argued that the veil historically functioned as a marker of gender hierarchy and social restriction. In this framework modesty is understood as mechanism that regulates the women bodies and mobility through male authority. Here modesty (*parda, haya*) is primarily understood in the framework of oppression. But later scholars made this understanding more complicated. **Saba Mahmood (2005)**, in her influential work on piety movements, challenged liberal feminist assumptions by arguing that practices such as veiling and modest conduct can also function as forms of agency and ethical self-cultivation. Rather than viewing modesty as imposed or control, Mahmood suggested that women may actively inhabit religious norms as meaningful expressions of faith and identity. From this debate this is clear that the meaning of modesty is not fixed, it is shaped according to social, political and

historical context. That's how modesty is a contested concept where oppression and agency both perspectives exist. Beyond feminist debates, **postcolonial theory** has provided further insight into the symbolic role of women's bodies in national identity formation and highlighted that women bodies often become the symbolic battleground in the struggle of national and cultural identity. **Partha Chatterjee (1989)** argued that in many postcolonial societies, the figure of the "traditional woman" becomes central to defining authentic culture. In this framing, western influence is positioned as moral threat and cultural invasion, here binary oppositions is crated between traditions vs modernity.

Although previous researches examine gender and modesty in cultural, religious and institutional context but there is limited focus on everyday digital discourse, especially in Pakistani twitter(X) discourse , limited systematic analysis are available on how the concept of *haya* is discursively constructed. Beyond this, in recent years (2020-2026) social media debates have been significantly intensified where the discourse related to gender, morality and cultural identity discussions is more visible, after the COVID period the digital engagement has been increased more, due to this online discourse becomes the central space for the formation of social opinions. Existing literature often focuses on traditional media or earlier socio-cultural context, but contemporary digital interaction where ordinary users actively produce meanings and contest is still limited and here **research gap** exists. This study analyzes the tweets from the 2020 to 2026 understand the discursive construction of modesty in current socio-political climate. This approach allows us to examine that how language power and ideology operates inn recent digital environment.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) especially on the theoretical concept of Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995) and the concept of power/knowledge developed by Michel Foucault (1978). Through the perspective of CDA language is not a neutral tool instead a social practice that reflect and reproduces the power relations, means language not only the tool of communication but also maintains the power structure in society.

According to Fairclough discourse operates on three interconnected levels; text, discursive practice, and social practice. At textual level the main focus in on vocabulary, grammar and lexical choices. In this study the repeated words like *farz*, *hukam*, *lanat*, *zever* are analyzed as ideological marker. When these words are repeated again and again, they made the modesty not as personal choice instead they made it as obligation and duty, here language normalize the ideology. **The second level, discursive practice** level examines that how meanings are produce, circulate and normalize (Fairclough, 1995). In the dataset of collected tweets, religious references and moral labels are repeatedly used can be so that modesty can be represented as divine command and unquestionable truth. These meanings seem as common sense after the repetition and people started to interpret is as natural. **The third level, social practice**, discourse is linked with broader structure like patriarchy, religion or nationalism. From the CDA point of view, discourse shaped the society and also shaped by the society. Here linking the concept of modesty only to womanhood reflects the wider gender hierarchy that already exists in Pakistani society. The concept of power is central to this analysis. For the conceptual support Michel Foucault's concept of power and knowledge is used. According to **Michel Foucault**

(1978), power is not only repressive but also reproductive, means power produces identities, norms and knowledge system. In this dataset, power operates in this manner that “good women” is defined as modest and obedient and deviation is labeled as immoral or shameful. Here moral policing, religious authority and protection narratives regulates the female identity without any direct force or oppression. Hence modesty becomes a disciplinary mechanism that maintains gendered power relations especially in digital space. At the same time, CDA recognizes that discourse is never completely fixed. Some counter-voices are also present in the dataset that challenge the dominant narrative. But frequency result and dominance made us to realize that traditional interpretations hold more strong discursive authority.

That’s why CDA is appropriate analytical lens for this study because it allows us to critically examine that how language constructs gender identities, naturalizes the moral expectations, reproduces the ideological power structure and maintains the patriarchy is digital discourse.

Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative research design to examine that how women’s modesty (concept of haya) is discursively constructed in Pakistani Twitter(X) discourse. The focus of this research is to explore meaning, ideology and identity construction not the statistical measurement, that’s why Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is selected as main methodological approach. As CDA view the language not neutral but a site where power and ideology operate. That’s why in this study language is not treated as only the tool of communication but treated as the medium meaning-making and social control. To make the strong analysis, the basic support of **computational linguistics** is used, but not for statistical proof but to support the qualitative findings of the research.

The study is interpretive and analytical in nature. Its main aim is to focus how language constructs social realities especially in context of gender roles, religion and morality. Social media is chosen as research site because it is seen as a public discursive space where people openly express their opinions and ideologies negotiate and contest openly. From a CDA perspective, Twitter(X) is a site where discourse circulates openly and people reinforce or challenge the power relations through language. The primary approach is qualitative but a small-scaled corpus-assisted method is also used so that lexical repetition and word associations (collocation patterns) could also be observed. The purpose of this hybrid approach is to connect the micro-level language patterns to macro-level language patterns.

Data collection: The dataset consists of **130** publically available tweets which were collected from Twitter(X), tweets are gathered from keyword-base searching and also the Pakistani identity of the user is identified by location mentioned in profile.

The following keywords and phrases were used in search bar:

- “haya”
- “parda”
- “be-haya”
- “modern larkiyan”
- “haya” “ islam” orat”
- “modesty” “parda”
- “hijab and orat”

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- “nazar neeche”

Only those tweets were included that directly discussed the women’s modesty, dress, religious obligation or moral behavior. Unrelated abusive tweets were excluded to maintain analytical focus on discursive construction rather than general hostility.

Sampling strategy: This study used purposive sampling method, the aim was not just the statistical generalization but to ensure discursive relevance. Tweets were selected on the basis of their thematic relevance and explicit engagement, especially the tweets where modesty, religion, gender expectations or moral judgment is clearly mentioned.

Analytical framework: The study applies Critical Discourse Analysis, primarily drawing on the three-dimensional model proposed by Norman Fairclough. According to this framework, discourse operates at three interconnected levels: Textual level (language, vocabulary, lexical choices), Discursive practice (how the statement circulates and reproduce meanings) and Social Practice (Broader power and ideological structure)

1. Textual level:

Here the focus was repeated words and evaluative expressions like; “farz”, “hukam”, “lanat”, “mehfooz” etc. These lexical choices and repetition were interpreted as how language constructs obligation, authority and moral judgment. When a certain word is repeatedly used, it normalizes the ideology.

2. Discursive Practice level:

At this level it was examine that how these tweets use religious references and binary oppositions like “Islam vs West”, “modest vs modern”. These oppositions create moral hierarchy and define an acceptable and unacceptable identity, that’s how language becomes a tool of symbolic power.

3. Social practice level:

At this level the research explored that these linguistic patterns reflect the broader patriarchal, religious and nationalist ideologies in Pakistani society. Here language becomes the mechanism to regulate the women’s behavior and the religious authorities and moral labeling operate as tools of discursive power, legitimizing gender inequality through normalized expressions.

Corpus-Assisted Support

To support textual analysisThe dataset was uploaded in Voyant tool to identify word frequency and collective patterns. Word frequency analysis helped to identify dominant lexical items, on the other hand collocation analysis highlights the strong word association patterns like “ourat and parda”, “orat and haya”, “orat and islam”, “orat and dressing”. Trend visualization helped to observe distribution patterns across the corpus.

Ethical consideration: Only publically available tweets were used, usernames were not mentioned in order to maintain privacy, as the aim of research is not to target the individuals but to analyze the broader discourse and ideology.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

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“*orat*” (119 occurrences), “*haya*” (91), and “*parda*” (90). The prominence of these terms already suggests that modesty discourse is overwhelmingly centered on women rather than framed as a gender-neutral moral principle. The trend visualization further shows the terms such as “*orat*” and “*parda*” appear in clustered segments rather than being evenly distributed. This suggests that discussions of modesty often intensify in specific conversational threads, indicating moments of heightened ideological engagement.

Collocation analysis reveals a strong association between “*orat*” and “*parda*,” with 51 co-occurrences in the corpus. This repeated pairing linguistically binds female identity to the concept of veiling, reinforcing the idea that modesty is constructed as a defining characteristic of womanhood. It shows that how language naturalizes and normalizes the association where womanhood is automatically linked with modesty.

Figure 3: Collocates Table

Term	Collocate	Count
Orat	Parda	51
Haya	Orat	48
Parda	Orat	48
Orat	Haya	46
Haya	Parda	35
Orat	Islam	14
Marad	Haya	11
Orat	Dressing	10
Islam	Pakistan	8
Marad	Parda	7

Following themes are extracted during data analysis:

1. Haya as the Essential female identity

In this theme, a dominant discursive pattern shows that modesty is made the defining identity of women. Statements like “*orat hay aka name hy*” directly equates womanhood to modesty, here language becomes the tool of essentialization. Words like “*zever*”, “*asal*”, “*khoobsoorti*” frame the modesty as inherit and natural quality not as personal choice. From the power perspective, it removes framing agency.

2. Religion as Ultimate Authority

Religious references are repeatedly used in this theme to close the debate. Phrases such as “*Parda farz hai*” and “*Allah ne hukam dia*” construct modesty as divine command. Lexical items like *hukam* (command) and *farz* (obligation) create a strong sense of discourse of authority. Disagreement is framed as disobedience. Language becomes a mechanism of disciplinary power.

3. Moral Policing and Conditional Respect

Tweets where women are given the labels of “*by-haya*”, “*bysharam*” show how moral judgment operates publicly. Language assigns shame and honor, respect becomes conditional and only assigned to those women who follow the modesty norms. From CDA lens it is the example of symbolic power. Here discourse regulates

the behavior thorough repeated moral labeling without any physical force.

4. The Protection Narrative

Some tweets justify modesty as protection: “*Parda orat ki hifazat ke liye hai.*” At surface level it seems protective and caring but linguistic framing shifts the responsibility for safety onto women and structural causes of harm become invisible. Here the ideological power operates as control is justified on the name of protection.

5. Sexual Blame Shifting

Statements like “*Orat ka libas mard ko majboor karta hai*” reverse the agency. Men is framed as passive responder whereas woman as cause. This linguistic structure normalizes the unequal moral accountability. This reinforces the patriarchal ideology as the responsibility shifts from male conduct to female appearance.

7. National and Religious Identity

Some tweets connect the modesty to national legitimacy like “*Pakistan Islam ke naam pe bana*”. Here the modesty becomes the political symbolism; Women’s clothing is positioned as evidence of national morality. Language links the individual behavior to collective identity formation and the power transforms the personal conduct to national duty.

8. Counter-Discourse and Resistance

Although dominant discourse frames the modesty as obligation but counter-voices also exist like “*Mard apni Nazar may haya paida kren*”. Tweets reminding men to “*nazar neche*” challenge blame-shifting logic. But corpus frequency shows that these types resistance are comparatively less prominent. This imbalance reflects the ideological dominance. Although alternative interpretations exist but moralizing narratives are more strong and visible.

Discussion

The analysis of **130** tweets reveals recurring discursive patterns surrounding women’s modesty in Pakistani social media discourse. Corpus-assisted analysis using Voyant Tools indicates that the most frequent lexical items include “*orat*” (119 occurrences), “*haya*” (90), and “*parda*” (91). Collocation patterns show a strong pairing between “*orat*” and “*parda*” (51 co-occurrences), suggesting a consistent linguistic association between female identity and *haya* (modesty).

Close textual analysis further identifies eight dominant thematic patterns:

1. Haya constructed as the essential identity of a woman
2. Religion invoked as ultimate authority
3. Moral policing and conditional respect
4. Protection-based justification of modesty
5. Sexual blame shifting
6. Western culture framed as moral threat
7. National identity linked with modesty
8. Presence of counter-discourse and resistance

The findings of this study shows that in Pakistani twitter(X) discourse, women’s

modesty is not simply a religious practice, instead, it is constructed discursively as a marker of moral worth, religious obedience and national loyalty. Though repeated lexical patterns, moral labeling and religious references, language not only describe modesty but it defines more than modesty that what should be the criteria and concept of “good women”. In this way, discourse becomes a site where power and ideology operate together. One of the prominent patterns is the **essentialization of female identity**. Women are repeatedly described as embodiments of *haya*, modesty is framed as “real beauty” or “true Jewe”. From a CDA perspective, this is the neutralization of ideology through language, when modesty is repeatedly associated with femininity it begins to appear natural rather than socially constructed. Power works here by limiting agency, modesty is no longer a choice but an expected condition of being a woman. The strong **reliance on religious authority** further strengthens this discursive control. The religious references in the dataset are very strong, through divine commands and obligations, discourse close the space for disagreement and close the debate. When modesty is presented as the order of divine the discourse shifts from opinion to unquestionable truth. This reflects the ideological process of naturalization described in Critical Discourse Analysis: beliefs become so normalized through repetition that they no longer appear ideological. Religion functions as a powerful discursive resource that legitimizes gender expectations and strengthens hierarchical authority. Another important finding relates to the **protection narrative**. At surface level modesty is frame as protection, it seems as caring and safeguarding, However, a closer analysis of language shows that responsibility for preventing harm is shifted onto women’s appearance and conduct. This subtle redistribution of accountability is a clear example of how power operates through discourse. That how prove that how power operates through discourse without any direct force. Here ideology justifies the regulation on the name of protection, and make the control benevolent. Social media becomes a space where behavior is monitored and corrected through moral commentary. At the same time, the **presence of counter-discourse shows** that ideology is never completely stable. Dominant discourse made the modesty obligatory but some counter-voices also exist. Some tweets challenge the male centered blames and emphasize the shared moral responsibilities, but the frequency pattern shows that this resistance is less dominant. This imbalance reflects the inequality of discursive power and traditional interpretations retain stronger legitimacy and authority within the digital space.

Conclusion

This study has examined that how women’s modesty is discursively constructed in Pakistani Twitter discourse using the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The findings make it clear that modesty is not presented as personal spiritual choice, instead, Instead, language repeatedly constructs it as a defining element of female identity, sign of religious obedience and the condition for social respect. That’s how discourse not only reflects but constructs the social reality too. The findings confirm that power in digital discourse operates largely through **normalization** and **public evaluation**.. Women who align with modesty norms are validated and those who challenge them face moral scrutiny. This is the clear example of symbolic and disciplinary power. At the same time, **counter-discursive voices** demonstrate that ideology is never completely stable. Some counter-voices challenge the challenge the dominant narrative especially to blame shifting logic, but corpus

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patterns also indicate that these resistances are comparatively less visible. Overall this study shows that social medial is not merely a communication platform but also a discursive arena where language constructs identities, maintains hierarchies and circulates the ideologies. The discourse of *haya* (modesty) reveals that language, power and ideology are deeply interconnected in contemporary Pakistani society.

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