

SINDOOR AND THE STATE: GENDERED SYMBOLISM AND STRATEGIC MASCULINITY IN THE PAKISTAN-INDIA 2025 CONFLICT

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Abstract

This study unfolds gendered and nationally strategic discourse of Pakistan-India 2025 conflict particularly of Operation Sindoor conducted by Indian military. In this context, this paper digs deep into the use of language in constructing discourses of gender, power, and national ideology. By keeping this in view, it combines Norman Fairclough's theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Carol Cohn's theory of "technostrategic" language and militarized masculinity. This research analyses official tweets and the media headlines that were also tweeted for this purpose. The analysis sheds light on the gendered metaphors of "sindoor", "mothers and sisters", and "Bharat mata" as a tool to legitimize strategic militarized masculinity in the form of nuclear strikes and violence by reinforcing social gender ideology. Through the critical analysis of gendered nationalist discourse, this research adds to the study of language and gender, it also contributes to the interdisciplinary studies. It deepens the understanding of language as a weapon in digitally mediated warfare discourse.

Keywords: language, technostrategic, gender, discourse, ideology, militarized masculinity, symbolic femininity,

Introduction

From the inception of human existence on the face of earth, language has always been a means of inculcating beliefs and ideologies by constructing realities and reinforcing power hierarchies. Specifically, in the time period of war, language is rarely neutral. It becomes a tool to build up and spread discourses of war to construct reality by the governmental and military officials. In the recent times, social media holds a significant stature in spreading narratives of war through different social media platforms regarding conflicts. The similar use of language has been observed while constructing political and military power, and gender discourses during Pakistan-India conflict 2025. India launched missiles in the name of "Operation Sindoor" on Pakistan in the wake of terrorist attack in Pahalgam Indian administrative Kashmir. In this connection, social media verdicts played an important role. Subsequently, There were a lot of tweets referring "sindoor": symbolic for women's marriage commitment in Hindu tradition, and also the metaphors of "deep strikes, and "surgical precision". In this manner, the conflict got turned into theatre not only to showcase military power but also for gendered nationalist discourse

Though there is a bulk of research available on how language has been used and manipulated in socio-political contexts globally yet there is dearth of literature that deals with the gender dynamics in the war rhetoric. This research aims to explore how language has been used in reinforcing gender norms under the banner of nationalism. For this purpose, this paper is set to analyze the social media tweets of government officials and military personnel. While digging deep into the use of language in constructing and maintain narratives, this paper uses the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis presented by Norman Fairclough (1992)

and, Carol Cohen's (1987) theory of technostrategic unveiling gendered war language. By applying these two frameworks, this research paper unfolds how in the war narratives of contemporary age, gender dynamics are maintained and reproduced. This paper tends to unveil the strategic use of language in reinforcing masculine hegemony while manipulating feminine identity and agency by turning them into mythological identities. This research argues that the symbolic femininity was strategically invoked to justify military retaliation.

The present research aims to answer the question, How do the symbolic femininity play a role in state's framing of Operation Sindoor, and how the war discourse reinforce gendered dynamics?

Literature Review

Language is an expression that not only define or describe things but which creates the identity of the objects it defines, or it talks about as Llamas & Watt. (Ed.). (2009) argue that words are so important for the everyday interactions that they can be easily taken for granted, however "in reality, our very sense of who we are, where we belong and why, and how we relate to those around us, all have language at their centre." (p.9) In other words texts or linguistic items are an integral part of the way we look at the world. Language not only defines or constructs, it is also an identity marker. Ibrahim (2013) claims that identity rests on three prongs, namely constancy and difference (who I am and who I am not); self-representation and perception (what I want the world to see and what the world sees) and agency and imposition (the amount of control I have over my identity construction and the weight of social structures). Vandeyar & Catalano (2020) gets into the discussion that identities are complex and are multi layered, they can be looked at as "the meanings a person attributes to the self" (Burke 1980, 18). Edwards (2009) claims the "essence of identity is similarity" (p.19) This is the reason that individuals, regions and nations behave very seriously towards their identity. It ties them all well.

In the aftermath of changing geopolitical scenario, the discourse of war, gender, and nationalism is altering and shaping each other with the help of language. Norman Fairclough (1992) in 'Discourse and Social Change' points out the significance of discourse in constructing and maintaining power structures. According to Fairclough "Discourse is socially constructive, constituting social subjects, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief, and the study of discourse focuses upon its constructive ideological effects" (Fairclough 42). He presented his three-dimensional framework of textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice to make the researchers able to understand the pivotal use of language in reinforcing, producing hegemonic ideologies. Wodak and Meyer (2009) have befittingly extended this model. This very performative role of language in discourse is critical to the exploration of this paper in analyzing power of language in producing war discourse.

Similarly, Carol Cohn (1987), in "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," sheds light on the technostrategic language used by defense intellectuals. I have coined the term "technostrategic" to represent the intertwined, inextricable nature of technological and nuclear strategic thinking. The first reason is that strategic thinking seems to change in direct response to technological changes, rather than political thinking, or some independent paradigms that might be isolated as "strategic." (On this point, see Lord Solly Zuckerman, Nuclear Illusions and Reality [New York: Viking Press, 1982] (Cohn 691) she claims that sanitized terms like "collateral damage" and "surgical strikes" erase the human cost of military violence. According to Carol Cohn, this language is not merely descriptive but ideological, designed to distance political and military officials from the ethical implications of their actions. This notion also reflects what Fairclough says that language constructs and naturalizes particular social realities.

While exploring feminism through CDA, the theoretical framework of Michelle Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis theory formulated in his composition *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Gender, Power and Ideology in Discourse* presents a political perspective on gender, concerned with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology in discourse (Lazar 5). Lazar's theory basically amalgamates feminism with FDA to uncover gender specific discourse. Lazar's theory tends to analyze: gender as discourse, gendered indiscursivity, symbolic femininity, hegemonic masculinity, discourse as social practice, and strategic essentialism.

To dig deep into the emotional side of the discourse, Ahmed (2004) in unfolds how emotions circulate between bodies and become tied to particular symbols and identities. Emotions circulate through objects: emotions are not a positive form of dwelling but produce the effect of surfaces and boundaries of bodies (p. 194). It relates its ties with the central theme of this research paper. This rhetoric links it with that of 'sindoor' in the paper. Diving deep into the construction of gendered war and military discourse, Housley (2007) expresses the fact how women bodies become battlefields of war by reducing them into symbolic objects and women's bodies are talked about as 'territory' that can be invaded and conquered. Duncanson and Eschle (2008) in *Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State: A Feminist Critique of the UK Government's White Paper on Trident* explores that gender is a mode of structuring relations of power. It basically extends what Fairclough and Cohn has formulated regarding discourse, gender, power, and ideologies. All these scholarly works contribute to the understanding of critical discourse analysis, role of language, and gender dynamics in the formation of nationalist discourse. Yet there is a gap in research that explores Pakistan-India 2025 conflict through CDA while keeping in view gender dynamics.

Methodology

This research paper uses the qualitative research methodology by using the theoretical framework of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis theory formulated in his composition *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), and Carol Cohen's notion of technostrategic language presented in his research article "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals" (1987). Critical analysis of the language that surrounded the 2025 conflict, specifically used in the initial military escalation of operation Sindoor, through these theoretical frameworks, provides a rich ground to investigate the reinforcement of gendered norms in the particular context. Fairclough's framework deals with the idea how discourse is socially constructed through language. It also hammers home the point that it becomes means to exercise and reproduce power. Cohen's Carol's insights on technostrategic language includes gendered metaphors, sanitized language, emotional elision, collateral damage, and militarized masculinity. Altogether, it provides a lens to critically analyze tweets from officials and important figures in the context of Pakistan-India conflict 2025 to understand how women were marginalized despite manipulating their existence in war discourse by reducing them to the symbols of honor, land and so on. While Carol Cohn's theory is coming out of her ethnographic work with defense intellectuals to bring home the point that how military language is pregnant with gender power ideology by excluding feminine-coded language and limiting it to abstractions.

For this purpose, this research uses six tweets of officials and significant figures behind the launch of 'Operation Sindoor'. It also makes use of headlines in creating war narrative from verified news channels and newspapers: The tweets have been selected with the help of hastags #operation Sindoor, #Pakistan-India conflict, #motherland, #Bharat Mata, #Ceasefire.

In this concern, the analysis includes understanding of the gendered terms through lexical analysis. It dissects the narrative structure and enforcement of conventional gender roles. It deals with the structures of gender power linked with emotions and its representation. It sheds light on the strategic silencing of femininity in the whole discourse. It is note-worthy to mention that the research relies on digital artifacts it is constrained by the availability of data. Tweets have been verified through social media platforms as well as original sources.

Discussion and Analysis

The Pakistan-India conflict, from 7th May to 10th May 2025, marks the tension due to the military escalation from both sides of the border. The escalation initiated by India by putting blame on Pakistan without any evidences of the terrorist attack on Pahalgam situated in Indian-administrated Kashmir on 22nd April. India launched surgical strikes on Pakistan and attributed it the name of Operation Sindoor. It triggered social media commentary, mass media rhetoric, and political and military officials addresses and statement while referring 'sindoor'. It placed gender discourse with the discourse of military strikes. Here, it is worth-mentioning to mention that Fairclough emphasizes, "discourse is the power which is to be seized" (Fairclough 57). Regarding this sort of gendered war discourse, Sophie Housley asserts, "the locating of gender relations as ongoing sites of conflict suggests that we should understand sexual violence in situations of national/civil armed conflict, as expansions in location, forms and intensity, as the intersection of two conflicts informed by, and constructed through, gender" (qtd.in Housley 2). In this connection, this analysis, through the theoretical framework of FairClough and Cohen, aims to unveil that the symbolic femininity was strategically invoked to justify military retaliation.

T1. Tweet by @PMO India (7 May 2025)

"today every terrorist knows the consequences of wiping Sindoor from the foreheads of our sisters and daughters" (PM @narendramodi).

While digging deep into the connotation of the title Operation Sindoor, the symbolism lies in it is very much evident. Sindoor, according to the Hindu religion, culture, and tradition, is a powder that married women apply on their forehead as a symbol of honor and being married. Here, it is worthy to take notice that this discourse of Sindoor is reducing women to symbols of marital commitments and honor by mythologizing it. In this perspective, Housley once again quotes Kelley to highlight that "women's bodies are constructed as both territory to be conquered and vehicles through which the nation/group can be reproduced" (qtd.in Housley 2). So the inherent femininity in the discourse is apparent. "Discourse is socially constructive, constituting social subjects, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief, and the study of discourse focuses upon its constructive ideological effects" (Fairclough 42). In this connection, it appears to be reinforcing traditional gender binaries where females are linked with mans' honor by taking their agency away. It reiterates men as empowered and protectors. Fairclough mentions, "discourse is a mode of action, one form in which people may act upon the world especially upon each other, as well a mode of representation" (Fairclough 69). Without any iota of doubt, it can be asserted that this discourse not only preserves for gender binaries but also paves the ways for strategic retaliation under the umbrella of nationalism. PMO India (12 May 2025) asserts, "today every terrorist knows the consequences of wiping Sindoor from the foreheads of our sisters and daughters" (PM @narendramodi).

T2. @PMO India (7 May 2025)

“today, every terrorist, every terror organization knows ... the consequences of trying to erase the sindoor from the foreheads of our sisters and daughters” (PM @narendramodi).

It quotes PM Modi’s address regarding Operation Sindoor: today, every terrorist, every terror organization knows ... the consequences of trying to erase the sindoor from the foreheads of our sisters and daughters”. Here, the female body appears as a metaphorical battlefield where India builds a narrative of feminine victimization to initiate a politically systematic war against Pakistan to protect militarized masculinity. The theorist puts it in a way: “certain uses of language and other 'symbolic forms' are ideological, namely those which serve, in specific circumstances, to establish or sustain relations of domination” (Fairclough 93).

T3. @IAF_MCC (9 May 2025)

“The Indian Air Force (IAF) has successfully executed its assigned tasks in Operation Sindoor, with precision and professionalism. Operations were conducted in a deliberate and discreet manner, aligned with National Objectives” (@IAF_MCC)

T4. (PM @Narendramodi) (8 May 2025)

PMO India tweets, "Operation Sindoor has redefined the fight against terror... setting a new benchmark, a new normal” (PM @Narendramodi).

In this context, the very discourse of the retaliation attack and launch of missiles, in the name of operation sindoor, uses the symbolism of sindoor as a tool to emotionally resonate with political and militaristic strategy. Duncanson and Eschle notes that “gender also functions as a symbolic system: our ideas about gender permeate and shape our ideas about many other aspects of society beyond male-female relations—including politics, weapons, and warfare” (Duncanson & Eschle 8). It can be understood by analyzing the language of the tweet by Indian Air Force after the launch of missiles: “The Indian Air Force (IAF) has successfully executed its assigned tasks in Operation Sindoor, with precision and professionalism. Operations were conducted in a deliberate and discreet manner, aligned with National Objectives” (@IAF_MCC). Here, lies a stark contradiction. The use of words like ‘precision’, ‘professionalism’, ‘deliberate and discreet’ frames the aggression and violence as morally coded instead of destruction of humanity. Cohn calls this sort of language “technostrategic”, he writes, “so I use the term "technostrategic" to indicate the degree to which nuclear strategic language and thinking are imbued with, indeed constructed out of, modes of thinking that are associated with technology” (Cohn 691). Basically, it works like a sanitizer to erase emotions and ethical concerns. It detaches the public with the emotion of human empathy for other human beings on the face of earth. The way sindoor becomes metaphor for femininity and emotions, Cohn uses the term ‘clean bombs’ as metaphor for emotional fallout: Clean bombs may provide the perfect metaphor for the language of defense analysts and arms controllers. This language has enormous destructive power, but without emotional fallout, without the emotional fallout that would result if it were clear one was talking about plans for mass murder, mangled bodies, and unspeakable human suffering. Defense analysts talk about "counter value attacks" rather than about incinerating cities. Human death, in nuclear parlance, is most often referred to as "collateral damage" (Cohn 692).

The ideologies embedded in discursive practices are most effective when they naturalized” (Fairclough 93). Another example of the discursive practice is another tweet of Narendra Modi: PMO India tweets, "Operation Sindoor has redefined the fight against terror... setting a new benchmark, a new normal” (PM @Narendramodi). The similar discursive framing of aggression appears in the post by Modi as he uses the words ‘benchmark’, ‘new normal’ to cover state aggression.

T5. @BJP4Rajasthan (9 May 2025)

BJP tweeted, “our job is to hit the targets, not to count the body bags #operationSindoor” (@BJP4Rajasthan).

The whole discourse of retaliation invokes conventional gender discourse through emotional elision by attributing it to women. BJP tweeted, “our job is to hit the targets, not to count the body bags #operationSindoor” (@BJP4Rajasthan). Sarah Ahmed, the theorist of Affect Theory presented in her composition *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, sheds light on the phenomenon. She asserts, “whilst thought and reason are identified with the masculine and Western subject, emotions and bodies are and racial others” (Ahmed 170). Throughout the conflict emotions are replaced by rational military discourse. “a discursive event may be either a contribution to prepare and reproducing traditional gender relations and hegemony therefore draw upon problematized conventions” (Fairclough 103). While critically analyzing it, Carol Cohn makes a statement from feminist perspective:

I believe that feminists, and others who seek a more just and peaceful world, have a dual task before us—a deconstructive project and a reconstructive project that are intimately linked. Our deconstructive task requires close attention to, and the dismantling of, technostrategic discourse. The dominant voice of militarized masculinity and decontextualized rationality speaks so loudly in our culture. (Cohn 51).

In the discourse of the particular conflict, the highly problematic contradiction is, while nationalism has been portrayed as feminine, the ideological and political language is sexually pregnant in masculine terms. For instance, officials, has been tweeting with “#Bharat Mata ki Jai” that is symbolic for femininity. In this concern, Duncanson and Eschle utters in their research article, feminists have long highlighted that the political and military power associated with nuclear weapons is linked metaphorically with sexual potency and masculinity” (Duncanson & Eschle 8).

T6. @TeluguChegu (7 May 2025)

Political Missile Pawan tweeted, “#operationSindoor In memory of our mothers and sisters whose sindoor on forehead is wiped by act of terrorism... Bharat went deep inside Pakistan wiping out terrorists” (@TeluguChegu).

On the contrary, Kalyan, Minister for Environment, Forest, Science and Technology of Andhra Pradesh through his twitter account Political Missile Pawan tweeted, “#operationSindoor In memory of our mothers and sisters whose sindoor on forehead is wiped by act of terrorism... Bharat went deep inside Pakistan wiping out terrorists” (@TeluguChegu). It mirrors what Cohen points out while shedding light on the military weapons:

soft lay downs, deep penetration, and the comparative advantages of pro-tracted versus spasm attacks—or what one military adviser to the National Security Council has called “releasing 70 to 80 percent of our megatonnage in one orgasmic whump.”¹⁴ There was serious concern about the need to harden our missiles and the need to “face it, the Russians are a little harder than we are.

This is exactly what reveals the inherent nationalist and political agenda to manipulate femininity for larger goals. Sarah Ahmed brings to light: the soft national body is a feminised body, which is ‘penetrated’ or ‘invaded’ by others (Sarah 2). It is also evident in Jaishankar’s statement: NDTV put it as a headline later on tweets, “If they are deep inside Pakistan, we will go deep into Pakistan.” Cohen encapsulates the idea, “sanitized abstraction and sexual and patriarchal imagery, even if disturbing, seemed to fit easily into the masculinized world of nuclear war

planning” (Cohn 698). While commenting on this gendered technostrategic language and its intentional and planned association, Duncanson and Eschle stresses that “this linkage is neither arbitrary nor trivial: sexual metaphors are a way of mobilizing gendered associations in order to create excitement about, support for and identification with both the weapons and the political regime possessing them” (Duncanson& Eschle 8). In this way, under the banner of “Jai Bharat Mata” by manipulating and reinforcing gender, a sanitized violence prevails to get political outcomes.

Conclusion

The current study looked at the operation Sindoor through the lens of Norman Fairclough’s *Discourse and Social Change* and Carol Cohn’s theoretical framework of technostrategic language unfolds that language is not only a means of communication but also a tool to reinforce gendered ideologies of warfare as well. This research through the above-mentioned frameworks has brought to light the intricate ways language of war discourse construct feminine symbolism to reproduce masculine hegemony of militarization. Fairclough’s CDA reveals the ways in which war narratives, social practices, and ideologies work in order to naturalize gender power structures. It reveals that the strategic war narratives pregnant with feminine symbolism in the name of nationalism make women more vulnerable. It links their existence in relation to man’s honor. By doing so, femininity gets manipulated as it is used as an emotional weapon to aggravate the situation for national and military gains. It reduces feminine autonomy in sociopolitical dynamics; it inculcates the very ideology that women’s bodies are territories to seize. Along with this, Carol Cohn’s theoretical framework builds up an inherent understanding of language, unveiling gendered metaphors, abstractions and euphemisms to reinforce militarized masculinity by depersonalizing violence. It stresses upon that while femininity is exploited to bring emotional excitement to the discourse of war in the meanwhile, the highly charged masculine militarized narrative is disassociated with the sensitivity of emotions to empower. In this regard, the ultimate constructed gender hegemony and use of sexual connotations further paves ways for gendered violence towards woman.

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