

A COMPARATIVE CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE PORTRAYAL OF WORKING WOMEN IN PAKISTANI TELEVISION DRAMAS

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ABSTRACT

This study includes the portrayal of working women within the Pakistani television industry by means of a Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In a culture where patriarchal values and dominant forms of masculinity shape social life, television dramas play an important role in culture. They influence how people view women, both as professionals and domestic lady. Even the media is focusing on portraying women as power but still it is limited to make a change in culture. The purpose of the study is to examine the ways in which popular Pakistani television dramas portray working women and the ways in which such women are characterized and evaluated. This study adopts a qualitative research design and Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis on selected scenes and dialogues from the dramas Zindagi Gulzar Hai and Kuch Ankahi. The data for the analysis grouped into four categories: Construction of Professional Identity, Negotiation of the Domestic and Occupational Spaces, Authority and Control, & Moral and Social Judgment. These categories analyzes the ways working women are portrayed in different dramas. The findings will highlight that even though both dramas portray working women as determined and ambitious, their professional identities are shaped as per gender roles, conditional empowerment, and social control. This study highlights the ways in which Pakistani television dramas both reflect and reproduce the dominant gender ideologies, thus influencing the social understanding around women's work, power, and social legitimacy.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Working Women Portrayal, Pakistani Television Dramas, Gender Ideology, Power & Society, Media Representation*

1. Introduction

The Pakistani televised dramas become a central element in the formation of the social understanding of gender, labour, and social roles, because of their wide audience and strong cultural impact. However, with the passage of time these narratives have gradually incorporated the female protagonists that are academically qualified, professionally active, and ambitious, thus reflecting the changing socio-economic realities. In these portrayals, working women are often portrayed as an embodiment of progress, strength, and empowerment and taking over spheres that were traditionally monopolized by men. However, these representations are never solitary; they are embedded in a more generalized cultural, ideological, and patriarchal discourses, which inform the formation and assessment of women professional identities. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a method, which provides a stringent analytical methodology to explore the roles played by linguistic, visual, and narrative features of media texts in creating and maintaining sociopolitical relations of power. In the realm of Pakistani TV dramas, CDA allows condensing a subtle investigation of how the representation of working women negotiates the themes of empowerment and subservience, ambition and conformity at the same time.

1.2 Problem Statement

Even though the Pakistani television dramas are increasingly portraying women in the workplace as strong-willed and strong-minded, the scholarship that is still there tends to assume that such portrayal is inherently empowering and progressive. This method fails to address the discursive processes that are less visible but create female professional identities, controlling and limiting them by existing gender standards and social expectations. Moreover, most of the available literature is based on either thematic or content analysis which does not focus much on how female agency is constructed and regulated in discourse and in ideological frontiers. There is also a lack of comparative Critical Discourse Analysis, which further negatively affects an insight into common trends in different stories. Consequently, there is still a lack of intellectual wisdom regarding the manner in which a so-called empowerment in such representations is conditional and subject to social domination.

1.3 Research Objectives

The main aim of the study is to critically analyze and compare how the issues of working women, in the Pakistani television serials, are represented using the methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis. The study aims at explaining the discursive formation of professional identities of working women in the stories of **Zindagi Gulzar Hai** and **Kuch Ankahi** particularly the way gender roles and social expectations shape the aspirations, authority, and involvement of working women in the work place. Another objective of the study is to examine the presentation of women empowerment as dependent

and controlled by existing social, moral, and cultural discourses. Finally, through the method of comparative analysis, the study attempts to highlight similarities and differences in the ideological trend that informs the presentation of working women in the two dramas that have been chosen.

1.4 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1. How are the professional identities of working women discursively constructed in Pakistani television dramas within frameworks of gender roles and conditional empowerment?*
- 2. In what ways do selected Pakistani dramas reproduce dominant gender ideologies concerning women's work, power, and social legitimacy?*

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is important at various levels. First of all, it complements the already available body of literature on the topic of gender representation in Pakistani media by replacing the descriptive narratives with a discussion-based exploration of power relations and ideological implications. Second, the Fairclough tripartite Critical Discourse Analysis framework gives the research a systematic and theoretically sound approach to explain how linguistic and visual narrative construct epistemological images of professional women. Third, the comparative space of the research preempts repeated ideological formations among various texts on television, thus providing subtle information with regard to how conditional empowerment is normalized. Lastly, the empirical findings of the study have the potential to enlighten practitioners, scholars, and the general population about the subtlest ways in which televised dramas shape the vision of the society on the role that women occupy.

3. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The paper will have a qualitative, comparative research design the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) to discuss the issue of representation of working women in Pakistani television dramas. The comparative method is used to find common and divergent discursive patterns in women professional identities development in two television narratives, *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* and *Kuch Ankahi*. Critical Discourse Analysis is specifically applicable to this research because it helps to conduct a thorough analysis of the language, ideology, and power relations within the media discourse.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The current paper is informed by Fairclough tripartite approach on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003), which understands discourse as a social practice that produces and maintains social meanings and power relations (Fairclough,1995).In this context, the analysis is performed at three interconnected levels: (i) the textual dimension, which deals with the linguistic characteristics, dialogue and narrative situations; (ii) the discursive practice dimension, which questions the creation, distribution and decoding of meanings in the media text; and (iii) the social practice dimension that situates these talks within the context of larger socio-cultural and ideological contexts (Fairclough, 2003).This model, by virtue of its tripartite nature, provides a systematic investigation into the simultaneous existence/production of working women in terms of the expression and reproduction of dominant gender ideologies, especially in the context of patriarchal regulation and patriarchal norms (Lazar, 2007; van Dijk, 2008).

2.3 Data Collection

The sources used to collect the data to explore this investigation included two Pakistani television serials, one titled *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (2012 2013) and the other titled *Kuch Ankahi* (2023). These serials have been specifically chosen because of their major emphasis on female characters that are actively involved in working environments and who negotiate their identities at the domestic, social, and institutional levels. The incorporation of series of various temporal setting helps in the comparative evaluation of continuity as well as evolution of gendered discourse of Pakistani television. The data included picked episodes and critical scenes which preempted the professional life, workplace relationships, family compromises, and ethical judgements of the female characters. The purposive sampling methodology was used to select the scenes where ambition, authority, decision-making, resistance, and social judgement concerns were clearly expressed in dialogue, narrative development and visual representation in accordance with the methodological principles of the qualitative critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003). Relevant conversations were transcribed where necessary and scenes revisited to allow consistency and accuracy on interpretation.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in accordance with Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework (2003). The analysis focused on how language, interaction, and narrative structures construct meanings related to women's work, power, and social legitimacy. To ensure analytical clarity and coherence, the data were organized under five thematic categories:

- (1) Construction of Professional Identity,
- (2) Negotiation of Domestic and Professional Roles,

- (3) Power, Authority, and Decision-Making,
- (4) Moral Judgment and Social Evaluation, and
- (5) Resistance and Conditional Empowerment.

Each category was examined comparatively across both dramas at the textual, discursive practice, and social practice levels.

2.4.1 Construction of Professional Identity

The discourses of ambition, struggle and moral legitimacy are used to construct the professional identities of working women in Pakistani television dramas. In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, professional ambitions of Kashaf are placed in the context of necessity and not a matter of choice. In one of the initial episodes, she mentions that education and employment are the only reasons to survive and that professional ambition can be justified only by distress and financial pressures. This discussion establishes the professional identity of Kashaf as something that has been earned and not inherited. Conversely, *Kuch Ankahi* introduces Aaliya as a self-assured and self-motivated individual in her career. In her interview session with the job firm, Aaliya stresses that she wants to have an independent identity outside her financial need. Although this image seems to be progressive, her ambition is nevertheless placed on the acceptable moral standards with the openness towards professionalism as the aspect to sincerity and self-respect. A comparative analysis of the two plays shows that despite the tone of the professional identities, they are both influenced by the gendered expectations that control the ambition of women.

Textual Analysis:

The professional identity of Kashaf in the television drama *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* is created in a discourse that predicts struggle and necessity. In one of the early episodes she says:

“Jab Parhna, meri majboori hai, shauq nahi. Agar main kamzor hui, zindagi mujhe kuch nahi degi.”

(“Education is my need, not my choice. Unless I am strong, life will pay me nothing.”)

The professional identity of Aaliya in the series **Kuch Ankahi** is defined as self-directed and aspirational. In a job interview, she says:

“Main kaam sirf paisay ke life nahi karti, mujhe apni pehchan chahiye.”
(“I do not work just to earn money; I desire my personal identity.”)

Discursive Practice Analysis:

These dialogues are produced within narrative contexts that legitimize women’s professional participation. Kashaf’s ambition is justified through hardship, positioning her work as morally

earned, while Aaliya's assertiveness is socially sanctioned through references to sincerity and integrity.

Social Practice Analysis:

Both portrayals reflect patriarchal gender ideologies that regulate professional ambition. Women's identities in professional spaces are conditioned by social approval, linking empowerment to moral and ethical acceptability.

2.4.2 Negotiation of Domestic and Professional Roles

Both dramas foreground the tension between domestic responsibilities and professional commitments in constructing the identities of working women. In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, Kashaf explicitly acknowledges that despite her employment, household responsibilities remain her primary obligation. This discourse naturalizes domestic labor as inherently female, positioning professional work as secondary and negotiable. Similarly, in *Kuch Ankahi*, Aaliya repeatedly reassures her family that her professional engagement does not imply neglect of domestic duties. Such dialogues reflect the conditional acceptance of working women, where professional participation is permitted only when domestic roles remain intact. Through these discursive strategies, both dramas reinforce traditional gender divisions while appearing to support women's employment.

Textual Analysis:

In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, Kashaf negotiates her dual roles, stating:

“Naukri zaroori hai, lekin ghar ki zimmedariyan bhi meri hi hain.”
(“My job is important, but household responsibilities are also mine.”)

In *Kuch Ankahi*, Aaliya reassures her family:

“Kaam karti hoon, lekin ghar se ghafil hone ka matlab yeh nahi.”
(“Working does not mean I am neglecting my home.”)

Discursive Practice Analysis:

Such stories add to the normalization of the twofold burden on the working woman. The dramas generate a discourse that binds women to justify their working by promising them continued household care by conceptualizing professional participation as secondary to domestic duties.

Social Practice Analysis:

The portrayal reinforces traditional gendered divisions of labor, presenting professional success as conditional upon fulfilling domestic obligations, thus reflecting and reproducing societal expectations of femininity.

2.4.3 Power, Authority, and Decision-Making

The use of power and authority of female characters is depicted as something acceptable as well as problematic. In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, Kashaf simply holds an institutional power; nonetheless, her resolute nature of decision making is often reworded as emotional rigidity. Adjectives like strict or cold are used to provide a moral judgment of her power and this implies that women power should be balanced with emotional sensitivity. Aaliya exhibits confidence in making career decisions in the workplace, as she frequently claims to have her professional decisions. However, her power is also being supported by the fact that she continuously justifies and explains her actions, which means that the power of women is to be justified and morally justified. These descriptions indicate that women are delegated authority but on conditioned basis and is still under the discursive regulation.

Textual Analysis:

Kashaf exercises institutional authority in *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, saying:

“*Qanoon sab ke liye barabar hai.*”
 (“The law is equal for everyone.”)

However, her firmness is described by other characters as “*sakht mizaj*” (rigid), framing authority as morally complex.

In *Kuch Ankahi*, Aaliya asserts professional decision-making:

“*Yeh faisla meri zimmedari hai, aur main isay justify kar sakti hoon.*”
 (“This decision is my responsibility, and I can justify it.”)

Discursive Practice Analysis:

The image of female power in both plays is demonstrated as being tolerable, although within limited conditions. The actions of Kashaf are discussed in terms of morality, whereas the acts of Aaliya require the constant justification, thus shaping the perception of the audience to a conditional acceptance of female power.

Social Practice Analysis:

Such representations reflect the norms of the society that places restrictions on female

authority. Female influence is granted by the world of professionals only on culturally approved limits, thus reinforcing patriarchal relations in the workplace and the social sphere.

2.4.4 Moral Judgment and Social Evaluation

The moral judgments form one of the fundamental processes that define the impressions of working women in the dramatised stories. The apparent gravity and emotional disengagement portrayed by Kashaf in *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* are factors that are systematically misconstrued as being incongruous to the expectations of femininity, which puts professional behavior in the role of a moral deviation in comparison to the recommended gender norms. A similar trend can be observed in **Kuch Ankahi* because Aaliya is extremely outspoken and thus exposed to additional societal is being judged more closely and her assertiveness is explained as an element that requires restraint. These ethical evaluations are being social regulations that discipline the behavior of women and reproduce traditional femininity scripts. The dramas are successful in making the working women morally responsible by providing a form of corrective feedback to align the professional competency with safeguarding social balance.

Textual Analysis:

Kashaf in *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* faces moral scrutiny for her seriousness and assertiveness:

“*Larki ho kar itni sakhti achi nahi hoti.*”
 (“Being this strict doesn’t suit a woman.”)

Similarly, in *Kuch Ankahi*, Aaliya is judged for being outspoken:

“*Larki ho, zara dheemi raho.*”
 (“You’re a woman; try to be a little softer.”)

Discursive Practice Analysis:

These evaluations function within the narrative to define acceptable femininity. Assertiveness is morally qualified, and audience interpretation is directed to associate women’s public behavior with emotional restraint and social propriety.

Social Practice Analysis:

The portrayal reflects broader societal mechanisms of moral surveillance, enforcing gendered behavior norms. Professional competence is inseparable fro

2.4.5 Resistance and Conditional Empowerment

There are also moments of defiance of established gender norms in both series through the female characters, who challenge gender norms through educational, employment, and decision-making avenues. In the framework of **Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, this disobedience is

expressed through the professional promotion of Kashaf, but her personal freedom is limited in the form of the need to follow the rules of marriage and love. Similarly, in *Kuch Ankahi Aaliya is introduced as an empowerment figure, whose independence is only recognized as appropriate with moral decency and familial approval. These representations suggest that despite the identification of opposition, empowerment is constrained and approved within the socially defined parameters. As a result, the series perform the role of a reflector and carrier of existing gender ideologies, pretending to be progressive in nature.

Textual Analysis:

In *Zindagi Gulzar Hai*, Kashaf asserts:

“Main ne sab kuch hasil kiya, lekin apni shartein maan kar.”
(“I achieved everything, but by accepting certain conditions.”)

In *Kuch Ankahi*, Aaliya declares:

“Main apni zindagi ke faislay khud karna chahti hoon.”
(“I want to make my own life decisions.”)

However, her empowerment is framed as valid only when aligned with family approval and moral decency.

Discursive Practice Analysis:

Resistance is celebrated narratively but simultaneously regulated. Both protagonists challenge societal norms while conforming to acceptable moral and social frameworks.

Social Practice Analysis:

These portrayals demonstrate that empowerment for working women is conditional. While resistance is acknowledged, it remains circumscribed by dominant patriarchal ideologies, illustrating that media discourse both reflects and reproduces social control.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Findings

The empirical evidence that follows shows that Pakistani television dramas represent working women as strong-willed, tough and professionally competent; however, they are still discursively controlled with regard to their empowerment. Although both, *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* and *Kuch Ankahi* prefigure the ambition and dedication of women towards professional life, these qualities are always placed in the context of gender expectations, morality, and socialization. Professional identity in such narrative constructions is not something one is entitled to have but rather a status that is acquired via struggle, training and ethical restriction.

The analysis below shows that professional roles of women cannot be separated or abolished and then domestic responsibilities, thus, supporting the assumption that work should not interfere with the traditional gender roles. The power and choice that female characters have is depicted as being tolerable only when done with moderation of emotions and moral restraint. Whenever assertiveness is portrayed, it is open to social judgement, thus placing working women in the state of constant moral scrutiny. The instances of resistance and self-assertion can be seen in the two stories, but it is highly regulated. The idea of empowerment is presented as conditional, justified only in cases where it coincides with the approval of a family, cultural values and social construct of femininity. Therefore, the plays both reflect and reproduce the mainstream gender discourses, providing a facade of progressive tendencies, but supporting the patriarchal order in which women are controlled in their work, power, and legitimacy.

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