

REFRAMING JUSTICE AND GENDER INEQUALITY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF COURTROOM NARRATIVES IN *PINK* (2016) AS COUNTER DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The study analyses the courtroom narrative in the film Pink (2016), which centres on a woman's right to autonomy over her sexuality. The study critically examines this discourse to explore real-world implications. Using van Dijk's social cognition theory (Dijk, 1993, p. 257) within the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, the researchers illustrate how certain ideologies and beliefs are socially constructed. Additionally, they explore how social cognitions influence communication and other forms of action and interaction. His critical analysis of the narratives reveals how the dominant group reproduces discourse to exert power and influence decisions that contribute to social inequality, particularly gender inequality. The focus is on the structures embedded in discourse that reflect public perceptions of women's character and sexuality. The study illustrates how societal views (social cognition) play a significant role in shaping women's identities, whether portrayed positively or negatively. The issue of gender inequality presented in Pink is relevant to Pakistani society, reflecting similarities in gender dynamics between India and Pakistan, as both nations contend with patriarchal systems, gender-based violence, and the challenges faced by women. The study implies a need for greater awareness of gender equality and encourages critical reflections on media portrayals of women while advocating for policy reforms to address gender-based inequalities.

Keywords: Pink, critical discourse analysis, social cognitions, gender inequality, feminism,

Introduction

The film *Pink* (2016), directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury and produced by Shoojit Sircar, addresses critical social issues like gender dynamics, consent, and the treatment of women in Indian society. It has received attention for its realistic portrayal of these themes, particularly regarding how women are perceived and treated in the context of Indian social norms. The power of 'discourse' holds significant importance in today's era of advanced communication technologies. The impact of discourses on society is well-recognized, reflecting a mutual influence where discourse and societal norms continuously shape one another. Fairclough (1989) emphasises this connection, illustrating the dialectical relationship between language and social practices. The term "discourse" primarily pertains to the use of language within social contexts (Fairclough, 1989; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Furthermore, Van Dijk (2008) expands upon this notion, mentioning that discourse involves various non-linguistic modalities found in contemporary mass media, such as multimedia texts and streaming videos (Abdullah, 2014). The evolution of discursive practices, influenced by technological advancements, has led to the expansion of communication methods, thereby increasing the significance of discourse in modern society. Media discourse, particularly in electronic forms, plays a crucial role in disseminating information (Abdullah, 2014). The media has emerged as a critical commentator on social issues, effectively integrating infotainment into diverse media outlets, including television, radio, and film. Consequently, cinematic works have highlighted numerous socio-political and cultural challenges prevalent in the societies they originate from, particularly in India's Bollywood film industry, with

films like *Lagaan*, *Rang De Basanti*, and *Taare Zameen Par* making substantial impacts due to their vast audiences. Recognizing the potential of impactful storytelling, media production houses strategically enlist renowned actors in films to tackle social themes. Amitabh Bachchan, a prominent figure in Bollywood, embodies key roles in films addressing social issues, including *Teen*, *Cheeni Kum*, *Black*, and *Pink*. For instance, *Cheeni Kum* caters to a mature audience, delving into the philosophical complexities of happiness and sadness (Kabab, 2007). In *Teen*, Bachchan portrays a grandfather frustrated by local authorities as he seeks to find his kidnapped grandson, while *Black* features him as a teacher guiding a deaf and blind woman, a narrative that is said to inspire hope. Given the profound influence of media discourse, scholars have increasingly examined this field. Wodak and Busch (2004) highlight that a substantial portion of research published in the journal *Discourse & Society* focuses on media texts (p.106). Films that confront social issues naturally attract experts and critics, as they possess the ability to contest societal norms and challenge stereotypes. Thus, the exploration of cinematic discourse has been integral to film history itself, and the rise of social media has further intensified this analytical focus. The Bollywood film *Pink* exemplifies this trend by addressing critical social messages, particularly regarding consent. The core message that a woman's "no" must be respected resonates widely with audiences, particularly young women who face everyday challenges. In the film, Amitabh Bachchan plays the role of a defence lawyer striving to ensure justice for victimised women (Gupta, 2016).

Gupta (2016) discusses *Pink* in the blog post, "A blazing indictment of all that's wrong with us" as a movie that compels the audience to face uncomfortable truths with courage and conviction. Analyst Sudha (2016) marks the movie as "A Bollywood film about India's 'rape culture and considers it a challenge to the Indian film industry's misogynistic tropes. Another critic, Mishra (2016) takes a feminist reading of *Pink* and affirms that the film actively questions the pre-conceived notions held by society for independent women. Jayashubha (2016) also reviews *Pink* from a feminist perspective and highlights the questioning of the patriarchal attitudes within the movie.

While reviewing analysts' talk on *Pink*, it is indispensable to discuss Bachchan's letter that he wrote to his granddaughters. The content of the letter is quite in line with feminism. Besides, Bachchan himself states that "Indeed, it is a letter to all granddaughters. From gender issues to marrying for love, from more" (Bachchan, Express Web Desk, 2016). Keeping in view the crime rate against women in India, the critics consider the letter quite significant. In his letter, Big B asks granddaughters to make their own choices and never pay attention to "*Log kia kahenge*" (What will people say?). The letter outlines what the audience hears from Bachchan in the courtroom drama of *Pink*. Both the letter and courtroom narrative hold significant implications in Indian misogynistic society and reinforce the connection between discourse and society. Undoubtedly, feminism is embedded in the film from beginning to end (Karandikar et al., 2021). No efforts are required to trace it since it is pervasive and crystal clear. The social implications of the movie have generated plenty of debate not only by critics and analysts but also by viewers. The current study extends the argument by considering the courtroom narrative for analysis. The major purpose is to highlight the role of social cognition in re/production of discourse and connect micro and macro approaches. Hence, without overlooking the feminist perspective, the current study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To examine how social cognition is formed through discourse.

- ii. To understand its influence on discursive practices and to identify how cognition shapes social construct.

The study aims to address the following questions to achieve its objectives.

Q.1 How does discourse shape and construct social cognition in terms of identity and power dynamics within different communicative contexts?

Q.2 In what ways do discursive practices both mirror and strengthen our social identities and societal constructs?

Literature Review

Kumari (2017) focuses on the analysis of *Pink* and its portrayal of gender roles, power relations, and how social cognition influences the perception of women. Basu (2018) critically examines how *Pink* challenges the patriarchal views on consent and justice, providing a feminist analysis of the legal and social barriers that women face in modern Indian society. Jadhav and Thorat (2016) analyse how *Pink* disrupts these cultural stereotypes by giving voice to the female characters, allowing them to redefine their identities within a society that tends to stereotype women based on their actions. The film, therefore, not only addresses legal issues but also delves into the cognitive biases that influence people's judgments about women's behaviour.

Narayan (2016) discusses how the film portrays the courtroom as a battleground where the victims' dignity and the social constructs around their behaviour are scrutinized. The movie draws attention to the hypocrisy of a legal system that allows such victim-blaming while showing the immense courage required for women to fight for justice in a system that doesn't automatically support them.

Gupta (2017) argues *Pink* plays a critical role in confronting deeply ingrained gender stereotypes and societal expectations that women should conform to specific roles, particularly in the context of sexual relationships. By showcasing the legal battle that unfolds in the film, the movie underscores the urgent need for a cultural shift towards recognizing women's rights to consent and bodily autonomy. The courtroom scenes, where the defence lawyer tries to undermine the credibility of the women by attacking their character, reflect the common legal tactics used to discredit female victims of harassment, especially in a patriarchal society (Basu, 2018; Gray, 2024; Kelley, 2024). Khan et al.(2017) have expressed that print media acts as a tool in the hands of capitalists. Ramzan and Khan (2019) have suggested that stereotyped ideological constructions are enhanced by nawabs in Baluchistan. Further, Ramzan et al.(2021) have indicated that there is a manipulation and exploitation of the public in the hands of politicians and powerful people. Ramzan et al. (2020) suggest that in the digital age, English dominance is visible in technology and the internet. Bhutto and Ramzan (2021) have claimed that there is a collusive stance and pacifier agenda of media wrapped in the strategy of power. Nawaz et al.(2021) have said that power is striving for negative them and positive us. Ramzan and Khan (2024) analyzed pragmatic hedges from politeness principles perspectives and linguistic coherence as culturalinsight in prologue of *The Holy Woman* and Epilogue of *Unmarriageable*.

Philosophical Underpinning

Van Dijk (2008, p. 354) describes that language and discourse are related to micro levels, whereas power and dominance are concerns of macro-level analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) aims to theoretically bridge the gap between micro and macro levels (van Dijk, 2008, p. 354). Thus, CDA facilitates scholars to get insight into the role played by discourse in creating dominance and inequality (van Dijk, 1993, p. 253).

Here, the courtroom narrative is an example of micro-level discourse of social interaction in a specific situation that involves dialogue and argument. However, at the same time may be a constituent part of the reproduction of feminism at the macro level. Besides, it represents at length socio-cognitive constructs. The researcher attempts to trace these constructs by critically analysing the said discourse. The analysis, based on van Dijk's theory of social cognition (Dijk, 2016, 1993, p. 257), enables the researcher to highlight how certain ideologies and beliefs are socially constructed and how communication and other forms of action and interaction are monitored by social cognitions (Van Dijk, 1989a, 2016). Individuals, through their discursive practices, represent socially shared beliefs, ideologies and values. Though social cognition is collective, it lies in the individual mind. The mental models of an individual are influenced by social cognitions, and they cannot think independently of them.

Within this social and cognitive background, critical discourse analysis focuses on the linguistic structures of discourse to observe how power is exercised through it (van Dijk, 1993, p. 259). Thus, this study demonstrates how participants' personal and social cognition in courtroom narratives shape discourse and illustrate Us and Them groups. It also highlights courtroom narratives as a counter-discourse to social constructs and develops a better understanding of the reciprocal relationship between discourse and society.

Methodology

Van Dijk's model of social cognition integrates cognitive science and social theory, highlighting how social knowledge, such as stereotypes, ideologies, and social norms, is represented in our minds and how it influences and is influenced by discourse. His work focuses on the cognitive aspects of how individuals perceive social structures, including power, class, and ethnicity, through language. This approach offers a comprehensive understanding of social cognition within a broader societal context, illustrating that our mental models are shaped not only by individual experiences but also by collective social discourses and ideologies.

The article critically analyses the courtroom narrative of the film *Pink*, hence draws upon the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis. To align with the research objectives, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory (1993, 2008) was considered during the data analysis. The discourse in the courtroom scenes involves all major characters of the film as participants and consumes almost half of the entire time. This interaction encapsulates the gist of the whole film. The critical analysis of the narratives of defendants, defendant's attorney, prosecutor/plaintiff, and witnesses (in the film) allows us to identify how dominant groups re/produce discourse to exercise power, and influence decisions leading towards social inequality, in this case, gender inequality. The courtroom narrative has been extracted from the film, and relevant examples are transcribed and then analysed.

The focus of analysis is the structures (lexical, syntactic and pragmatic) embedded in discourse that particularly reflect the public mind regarding women's character including sexuality.

Data Analysis

This study analyses courtroom narratives from the perspective of social cognition to connect micro and macro levels and achieve a cohesive critical insight.

As already mentioned, the courtroom narrative involves all major characters of the film, including three women who have been the victims, the lawyer (Amitabh Bachchan as the protagonist), and the man Rovi, who is the plaintiff. Additionally, there are the judge, prosecutor, witnesses, and others involved. Closely examining this interaction reveals multiple aspects of discourse and discursive practices. Two distinct discourses run parallel. One questions the character of the accused women, representing stereotypical socio-cognitive constructions., hence undermining their identity and chastity in a misogynistic country like India. This does not surprise the audience, especially those aware of Indian socio-cultural norms and values. In this context, the viewer's understanding of Indian society influences the interpretation of discourse structures in a specific way. This phenomenon shows how personal and social cognition affects interpretation and comprehension. This anti-feminist discourse relies heavily on the plaintiff, prosecutor and most of the witnesses. Witnesses include male friends of the plaintiff and the lady police inspector. It is ironic, however, that the lady police inspector's narrative falls into this category. It exemplifies a woman's role in constructing a negative identity for another woman, just based on socio-cognitive constructions. Individuals may act based on their interests or feel pressured by the dominant group who manages to control minds and actions, thus exercising cognitive power as highlighted by Fairclough and Dijk (1985, 1993, 2008) The text discusses a woman's experience, shedding light on the primary discourse surrounding it. In contrast, the counter-discourse emerges as a challenge to this narrative. This counter-discourse is primarily presented by the defendant's attorney, Amitabh Bachchan, while the three women involved, including the defendant and her friends, also contribute to it.

The researchers analyse semantics and pragmatics (lexical items, syntactic structures, tone) of courtroom discourse in the light of socio-cognitive theory. The study makes a parallel analysis, keeping in view the distinction made above. It is important to note that stereotypical discourse often adopts an aggressive and ironic tone. The narratives of the prosecutor and the plaintiff are examples. The comments/statements of the society members represent how women are judged in a particular way on account of their routine and timing. For example, "*larkian late ate hen*" (girls come home late) or "*akeley he rehte hen*" (live alone). It shows that staying away from home till late hours is not acceptable in Indian society. However, this situation applies only to women, highlighting double standards and differing mental models among various social actors. Further, it highlights the shared beliefs and ideologies of the particular group that stem out of social cognition. The prosecutor leaves no stone unturned to influence the court's decision. He signifies stereotypical social constructs through intimidating and satirical remarks during cross-questioning. For instance, while referring to the financial needs of one of the women, he states, "*Dost ya dost se ziada..?*" (Just a friend or more than that...?), he adds, "*Umer men barey b hen, bachi k bap b hen*" (He is older and has a daughter as well). These remarks reflect social assumptions concerning women's associations. That suggests that women only develop friendships with an aged person for financial reasons. The prosecutor quite ironically asks, "*asi ak do doston ka hamne b btaen jo hmarey b ghr chla saken*" Please suggest a couple of friends who could help manage our home.). Here, socially shared attitudes and beliefs facilitate the prosecutor to strengthen his argument against women. The discursive strategies adopted by the prosecutor demonstrate that socially constructed stereotyped identities, irrespective of man or woman, become quite impactful in the case of institutional and legal practices. Thus, it emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between discourse and society, as they shape each other mutually. The dialogues between Wan (plaintiff) and Amitabh Bachchan (lawyer) provide ample opportunity to realize how personal and social cognitive models function to negotiate for one's interests and

exercise power. Wan un-hesitantly remarks, "*Aise larkeon k sath asa he hota he... pata kia bulaya jata he in ko...?*" *Girls like them deserve it; do you know how they are labelled?*) These words represent Wan's mental scripts regarding women's identity and social status, in addition, they reflect how individuals' mindsets form public mindset or vice versa. Wan's hesitant accounts of his own sister and family members' social manners give clue to Indian dual social standards; that do not question the character of influential women. It confirms that discrimination occurs not only between men and women but also among women themselves. It shows that socially shared values are given due importance, and they contribute a great deal to constructing specific identities for people belonging to specific groups. Wan's reaction to Bachchan's remarks demonstrates that individuals try their best to be advantaged by taking the plea of public mindset (socially acceptable norms) even in legal proceedings. This emphasises the relationship between the micro and macro levels.

The counter-discourse was produced most of the time by Bachchan (the defendant's attorney). Verbal and nonverbal expressions of Bachchan appear ironic throughout the drama. This helps him to be critical of socially acceptable constructs in an unthreatening manner. The safety manual for women, as ironically suggested by Bachchan, has sparked considerable discussions. He asks the question from the victim, "Are you a virgin?" It is not the question but Bachchan's non-smirking manner that creates the difference right from the beginning. It should be noted that he does not summarize the manual in one sitting. It should be noted that he does not summarize the manual in one sitting/hearing, but rather keeps inserting fragments in connection with the whole argument. For example, "*Sharaab ko yahaan per ek kharab character ke nishani mana jata he, larkion k liye. Larkon k lea nahi. Larkon k liye, yeh sirf ek health hazard hai*" (Alcohol is considered a sign of bad character here, for girls. Not for boys. For boys, it's just a health hazard).

The expressions carry multiple implications. First, it presupposes that the public mindset allows men to be drunk without questioning their character, second, it illustrates how detrimental it is for a woman's chastity. Nevertheless, men are exempted who may just have health issues on account of being drunk. Bachchan's way of stating these verdicts gives additional value to them. It sarcastically entails that women of good character must not be taking wine; it appears as a direct satire on dual standards resulting from shared public beliefs, i.e., social cognition. It implies that the public perspective attached to different social practices cannot be ignored, so individuals, especially women, must adhere to it to safeguard their modesty. On another occasion, he remarks, "*Shehar men larkion ko alag nae rehna chaheay, akele nae rehna chaheay. Larkey reh saktey hen par larkian nae. Independent larkian larkon ko confuse kr dete hain!*" (Girls should not stay alone in cities, boys can live alone but not girls. Independent women confuse the boys). These verbal expressions again expose how women are treated in Indian society. Bachchan beautifully puts the blame on women's shoulders for confusing men and criticises social ideologies in an unthreatening manner. His ironic affirmations of men's social practices and attitudes strengthen this counter-discourse. The protagonist gradually adopts a direct stance, "*Agr larkian larkon k sath dinner ya drink per jati hain, to woh unki apni choice hote hai. Available hone ka signboard nahi ban kar jati hain wo!*" (If a girl goes out for dinner or drinks with a boy, that is her own choice. She doesn't pretend to be available!). This is how Bachchan categorically warns men to be watchful in their presumptions and assumptions concerning women's character and directly satirises social constructs. He further states, "*Raat ko larkian jab sarak par akele jati hen th gaariyaan slow ho jate hen aur unk sheeshe neeche utrne lagtey hen. Din men ye mahaan idea kisi ko nae aata!*" (When the girls walk alone on the road at night,

cars slow down and windows lower. Someone never thinks of this great idea during the day). Here, Bachchan points out that a woman's character and chastity are measured by time calculations, as he phrases, "*ghari ke suian decide krte hen character*" and so on (time determines a woman's character).

Towards the end of the courtroom drama, Bachchan assumes rather a philosophical stance that once again enhances the counter-narratives effect. While explaining the significance of the word "*na*" (No), he encapsulates, "These boys must realise, "*na' ka matlb 'na' hota hai. Use bolne wali koe parichit ho, friend ho, girlfriend ho, koe sex worker hoy ya aapki apni biwi he kun nah ho*" (Na' means 'no', the person speaking it may be an acquaintance, a friend, a girlfriend, a sex worker or even your wife). He adds, "No means 'no', and when someone says no, you stop!". This is how he succeeds in pinpointing the wrong assumptions on men's side. He emphatically underscores a woman's freedom to her sexuality. In addition, criticises the social practices and beliefs that pay no attention to "*Na*" (No) when it comes to women's freedom of their sexuality. Hence, it makes all the participants and the audience stop and ponder over such issues for a while. Even though courts make decisions considering the seriousness of crime and strength of evidence, the role of public/social cognition and socially constructed identities cannot be denied. This might complicate the process of establishing facts for less dominant groups, as it happens in *Pink* in the case of the three women, i.e., victims.

Discussion and Conclusion

A brief analysis of courtroom narratives offers an insight into the socio-cultural ideologies and beliefs of Indian society. The narratives mirror chauvinistic and patriarchal social constructs and appear as an explicit criticism of Indian misogynistic society, as highlighted by Mishra (2016). The participants' linguistic choices, tone, and temperaments demonstrate how personal and social cognition significantly contribute to discourse production. It also illustrates how cognitive power is exercised for personal interests through discursive practices. Moreover, the analysis makes it evident that social cognition unobtrusively spaces itself into the daily interactions of social actors (Dijk, 2016). Besides, it not only influences social interactions but also affects interactions in legal and institutional settings. Another significant point is that personal interests also interfere, as social actors de/emphasise different social constructs depending upon the need of the hour. It is visible in Wan's (plaintiff) character.

The gender inequality issue presented in *Pink* is pertinent to Pakistani society, reflecting similarities between gender dynamics in India and Pakistan, given that both nations experience patriarchal systems, gender-based violence, and hardships faced by women (Zia, 2024). In *Pink*, dual social standards and feminism resonate with Pakistan's ongoing struggles with gender inequality. Like India, Pakistan's patriarchal society affects women's identity and security, and the film highlights class-based discrimination among women, a common issue in Pakistan (Shah & Sahito, 2023).

The safety manual proposed by Bachchan in *Pink* is significant for Pakistan, where crimes against women remain high. Questions raised in the film, like "Is there a need for a safety manual for women?" are just as relevant in Pakistan, where deeply ingrained gender biases affect women's security, freedom, and opportunities.

Bachchan's 2016 letter to his granddaughters, encouraging men to engage in addressing women's issues, is an important message in Pakistan, too. His role as a defender of women's

rights in the courtroom highlights how men can challenge societal norms and advocate for gender justice. The irony of women depending on male lawyers in *Pink* mirrors Pakistan's issue of women relying on men for protection, sparking debates on women's empowerment within patriarchal frameworks (Thangam et al., 2022).

Pakistani media, much like Bollywood, influences public perception. Films like *Khuda Kay Liye* (2007), *Bol* (2011), and *Verna* (2017) attempt to address social issues such as women's rights. *Pink* contributes to this emerging trend, providing a platform for discussing universal gendered conflicts. Its courtroom scenes resonate with Pakistani audiences, reinforcing the necessity of respecting women's autonomy and freedom (Wagha, 2024).

Bachchan's involvement in *Pink* shows the responsibility of public figures, especially men, in challenging societal norms and helping shift the narrative around women's rights in Pakistan. His role promotes critical reflection on gendered expectations and the importance of deconstructing harmful stereotypes (Yousaf & Peacock, 2023).

Ultimately, films like *Pink* have the potential to shape social cognition and challenge patriarchal views in Pakistan, paving the way for a more equitable society. This study emphasises the need to raise awareness and challenge stereotypical representations of women, contributing to a shift in public consciousness.

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