



RESEARCH PAPER

Discursive Constructions of Women's Bodies: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Autonomy and Empowerment in Pakistan

¹Dr. Asma Majeed, ²Dr. Raana Malik and ³Dr. Asima Riaz Hamdani

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, Kinnaird College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Professor, Department of Gender Studies, University of Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author	asma.majeed@kinnaird.edu.pk
------------------------------	-----------------------------

ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a critical discourse analysis of the discursive constructions of women's autonomy and empowerment in Pakistan, limited to the selected articles from three online Urdu weblogs (2019-2021). The study is contextualized by the societal clash between feminist and traditionalist ideals, where discourses on both sides paradoxically contribute to women's objectification. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, the study deconstructs underlying ideologies within and between the texts. Results indicate the concept of autonomy is fluid and ideologically driven, creating a central paradox where competing narratives converge on objectifying women. The analysis highlights profound ambiguity in key slogans and a disconnect between perceived and actual autonomy. It is recommended that public discourse move beyond simplistic binaries toward greater conceptual clarity. Future advocacy should critically assess rhetorical strategies to avoid perpetuating objectification, necessitating the development of alternative discursive frameworks for discussing women's agency.

KEYWORDS Critical Discourse Analysis, Discursive, Feminist Discourse, Traditional Discourse, Body Policing, Autonomy

Introduction

Contemporary Pakistani society constitutes a discursive battleground where a profound clash of ideas and ideals is being waged. This ideological contestation is most visibly articulated in the debates surrounding women's rights, situated between and among secular and religious feminists on one side, and their secular and religious anti-feminist counterparts on the other (Ali & Majeed, 2018). Central to this conflict are the discourses of women's autonomy, empowerment, objectification, and body policing, which saturate online media and public debate. This research paper conducts a critical discourse analysis of these competing narratives, examining how they are constructed within online Urdu weblogs.

The central problematic this paper addresses is a fundamental paradox: both the discourses advocating for women's autonomy and those arguing against it appear to converge on an unintended consequence, the persistent objectification of women in public and private spheres. This study posits that the very arguments and rhetorical strategies deployed to liberate women from objectification often prove counter-productive. By examining the discursive constructions of empowerment and resistance, the paper reveals

how agendas of liberation can simultaneously constrain and restrain women, delegitimizing their voices and framing them as deviant or alienated from societal norms.

Utilizing Norman Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, this paper deconstructs the underlying ideologies, discursive strategies, and textual tactics employed by authors across the ideological spectrum. The data is drawn from a two-year period (March 2019 to March 2021) across three prominent Urdu weblogs. The analysis aims not merely to describe these discourses, but to expose the inherent ambiguity and conceptual fluidity of terms like "autonomy", demonstrating how their meanings are context-dependent and ideologically driven. Ultimately, this research contributes a nuanced understanding of the complex and often contradictory ways in which women's bodies and agency are constructed in the contemporary Pakistani digital sphere.

Literature Review

Objectification is defined as a process or condition in which a human being is degraded to a thing (Nussbaum, 1995). Nussbaum enlists seven different ways in which objectification can occur: Instrumentality (when a person is treated as tool), Denial of autonomy (when a person is viewed as devoid of autonomy), Inertness (when a person is viewed as having no agency or activity), Fungibility (when a person is treated as exchangeable with objects), Violability (when a person is viewed as lacking integrity), Ownership (when a person is treated as a thing that can be owned by others) and Denial of subjectivity (when a person's feelings are not given consideration) (Nussbaum, 1995). In this conceptual categorization, objectification is not essentially sexual in nature. Objectification may have other ends and any person regardless of gender can be objectified by any person.

Sexual objectification is a condition of sexualization and occurs when woman's sexual functions or sexual parts are viewed as separated from her self and treated as instruments (Bartky, 1990). Self-objectification is internalization of other's objectifying views, when a person views herself as an object. Self-sexualization is "voluntary imposition of sexualization to oneself" (Choi & DeLong, 2019). Self-sexualization, in other words, is viewing oneself as a sex-object.

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi & Huang, 2008) posits that women experience their selves reduced to their bodies or body parts in their daily lives. Body appearance and its utilization by others determine the value of objectified bodies. The portrayal of these bodies in patriarchal societies equates women's sexual bodies with their value of the self. Women objectify themselves when this view is internalized by them and they judge their bodies according to their appearance to others. This is self-objectification and self-objectified women become passive without expressing their desires and needs. Self-sexualization is problematic when associated with women's agential role and assertive behavior. One view is that feelings of sexual esteem and sexual pleasure are resulted by self-sexualization (Grower & Ward, 2021). It means that self-sexualized women tend to become more assertive in their sexual expressions and desires. Other view is that such notions of empowerment indicate commodification of women's sexual lives (Cherkasskaya & Rosario, 2019). Whatever view is true, commodification and objectification is present in both cases and it is not sure that self-objectification and self-sexualization earns dignity, respect and equality to women. This is because sexual enjoyments of sexualized bodies are limited to sexual encounters and sexual satisfaction and not expand to broader realms of autonomy. It is argued that self-objectified and self-sexualized women are not really empowered rather they have conformed the cultural

beauty ideals and hence they find worth in body appearance and appeal to sex (Grower & Ward, 2021). It may be the case the sexually assertive women are rewarded with the assertiveness for their efforts to conform to the cultural ideals of body appearance. This leads to different outcomes in different social and cultural settings. It means that variations in the norms of body appearance might have negative effects of self-sexualization and sexual freedoms might be looked negatively in certain cultures. Self-sexualization and self-objectification has no direct route to empowerment and emancipation.

Empowerment and sexualization are viewed now associated as media is representing sexy women as powerful (Gill, 2008). In western societies, sexualization is endorsed as a road to success and women are encouraged to sexualize their attitudes (Anderson, 2014). As a result, self-objectification or self-sexualization are reported to empower women (Bue & Harrison, 2019). Consequently, self-objectification in women has increased in association with the belief in the power of self-sexualization. The instrumental view of body and sexuality is contributing to the maintenance of patriarchy (Calogero, 2013). Thus the empowerment through sexualization proves illusory. Women themselves utilize their charms and to achieve their goals but this objectification reduces their morality. Furthermore, sexual openness and revealing attires encourage men to fulfil their sexual desires and invite them to rape (Blake et al., 2016; Gervais et al., 2020). Sexual openness increases women's agency but this instrumental activity leads to objectifying behaviors and moral condemnations by others (Wilde et al., 2020).

There are women's reports of sexual empowerment through objectification but these subjective reports are doubted and questioned (Peterson, 2010). There is debate that women are immersed in sexualized culture that encourages them to engage in self-sexualization (Murnen & Smolak, 2012). By displaying and expressing in sexualized ways they are supposed to be empowered (Tolman, 2012). But empowerment is seen as a commodity that is now serving as to sell the services and products (Gill, 2008). This means that women are told to buy and use specific services or products that will enhance their power and their lives will become better. Sexual empowerment is the domain in which women are appreciated to display their sexual enjoyments and active sex roles (Gill, 2009).

Acting in a sexualized manner is supposed to be liberating and empowering for women (Griffin et al., 2013). Whether it is real empowerment or not but women feel that they are empowered while acting in a sexualized way (Curie et al., 2009). Apart from this confusion, this type of empowerment can be contested on several grounds. First, this sort of empowerment is may not be morally good in certain cultural settings. Second, empowerment through the display of sexuality may be viewed as a type of objectification and self-sexualization where women use their sexualities to achieve certain ends. Third, it is not sure whether empowerment is the result of sexualization or the vice versa. And lastly, it is quite unsure that such a liberation and empowerment is possible for all women. Because of such challenges, self-sexualization through objectification is not considered the actual empowerment (Erchull & Liss, 2014).

Empowerment, freedom and choice are the buzzwords to sell products to women and attract them to the dominant beauty practices (Mckay et al., 2019). Studies show that women conforming to prevailing norms of beauty are likely to earn more income than women who do not conform to those norms (Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). Public perception is that beautiful people are more desirable, likeable, more trustworthy and more intelligent (Langlois et al., 2000). This explains how women are engaging more and more in self-sexualization and achieving western beauty standards. They tend to be more visible, revealing and expressing than ever due to the accompanying phenomenon of empowerment. Culturally, this struggle for conformity may prove constraining but media

landscape shows women playfully and willingly expressing their sexualities. Discursively, women's beauty and choice are constructed in a way that women are compelled to conform to oppressive standards (Mckay et al., 2019).

Material and Methods

Critical discourse analysis is a framework as well as methodology to investigate the intricate relations of language, ideology, power and social practices converged in media texts (van Dijk, 2006; 1988; 2000; Fairclough, 1995). CDA is also used to deconstruct and interpret media discourses and to reveal the reality of different discourses (Henry & Tator, 2002). CDA as methodology focuses on underlying theoretical penchants of texts and the structures, functions and social contexts involved in their production and propagation (van Dijk, 1988; Fowler, 1991; Fairclough, 2003). Based on Fairclough's (2001, p. 20) three-dimensional methodological analysis, the paper describes, interprets and explains the present and absent discourses within texts that were produced to challenge women's objectification discourses and practices.

Three online Urdu weblogs were selected for data collection and analysis: *daanish.pk*, *humsub.com.pk* and *daleel.pk*. These weblogs are independent websites with explicit ideological tendencies where a huge number of individuals from almost all fields of life write and discuss on various issues. These weblogs are not usual news websites but have a scholarly and academic flavor. Authors write their opinions just like columns, editorials, commentaries, repertoire and essays. Publication process is short and free of cost and indiscriminate. Though their ideological tendencies are known but a mixture of ideologies can be found on all these weblogs. Easy access and wider availability have made these weblogs popular in Urdu speaking world.

Collected data from these weblogs from March 2019 to March 2021 comprised of 153 articles that provided insights for contextual and intertextual analysis. All the articles were in Urdu language. For the purpose of analysis, selected articles were translated into English and major themes were identified within the texts. The detailed analysis followed Fairclough's model of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993). This detailed analysis analyzed the whole article considering it an organic unit. This paper presents analysis and discussion of two identified discourses in the data collected.

Results and Discussion

Discourse of Women's Autonomy and Body Policing

Autonomy, authority, agency and freedom are sometimes interlaced or interchanged in the local discourses of women's objectification. Sometimes these are explained in social and economic relations but the dominant constructions, in the sway of Women March slogans, tend to challenge the host of subtle manners in which women's body is policed either in the name of morality or broader cultural sensitivities. This section overviews the discursive fragmentation and opposing views as constructed in the texts.

Autonomy appears only once in the whole collection of texts from *Daleel.pk* and this word is used having other explicit connotation of freedom. Khalid Masood Khan criticizes the participants of Women March and discusses their popular slogan "My Body, My Will" in the context of Pakistani social fabric:

By the way, is this women's march representing the exploited class of women? A woman who can hold a banner of "My body, my will" and hold her chest in front of the cameras, shout slogans in front of the TV cameras, and publish photos in the newspaper, you can tell yourself about her. One can imagine how independent, free and needless she will be. The woman who is being exploited by force in this country has no knowledge about this woman's march... All these slogans showed that these sloganeering women have all kinds of freedom and no one has the courage to stop them, neither at home nor in the society (Khan, 2020).

The writer argues that these women who are demanding autonomy and freedom are in fact free and autonomous precisely because they are demanding freedom and autonomy. This construction is sound in the context of women activists because they demand autonomy and freedom for other women, not for themselves. This construction might be construed as misleading but the concept of autonomy obstructs any other conclusion because autonomy in the original sense is not demanded and more so not for others. Discursively it is quite legitimate to argue that everyone is autonomous and free to live as one wishes.

Philological construction of the discursivity consciously selects the words that reveal women as objectifying their bodies. The same choice of words can be turned upside down to argue that these words objectify the women who are protesting against objectification. It works both ways. The writers uses the word "breast" or "breasts" in front of media cameras. One meaning is that the women have the courage and dare to face and compete. The other meaning is that they are shamelessly bold to display their thorax and mainly the breasts in front of cameras for the purpose of being photographed. In either case, the sense of shame and modesty is present. The sense of the obscene is convincingly the textual intention as the discourse is criticizing the women who are claiming their will on their body. The overall impression is that obscenity and promiscuity are what come in the name of body autonomy. The discourse makes it clear that these women who are chanting this slogan are enjoying all sorts of freedoms and no one is there to stop them neither at home nor in the society. The conclusion is that "my will" argument does not work in all spheres and all times.

Body policing by the men and society as a whole is what the women are criticizing through this slogan. It depends on the arguments of the parties whether this policing is legitimate or not and with what desideratum. Muhammad Amir Khakwani (Daleel.pk) argues in the favor of body policing both for men and women:

It is of course possible to politely explain to my close relatives, my wife and my daughter that when going out, wear a dress that covers their body properly, fulfilling the need for a veil. No abaya or niqab, but a chador should be nicely put on. Do not wear tight, body revealing clothing. At home, sometimes women are walking around in relaxed clothes, they should be reminded that the dress for going out should be relatively different, more decent and concealing. It should not be said and demanded of men that we (women) will wear whatever we want, but you guys keep your eyes down. This argument is absurd (Khakwani, 2019).

His construction is that men must not stare at women; instead they should lower their gaze, enforcing coercion on the self to ensure this. At the same time women should dress properly and cover their bodies. We cannot shut other's staring eyes but we can cover our bodies. The dress must not be revealing the body contours. It is not logically valid to

demand that men should not gaze at women's bodies in whatever condition it appears. This logical construction has some weight even in the liberal framework. If women have the right to display or use their bodies at their will then men have the right to use their sight and eyes at their own will. In other words, women who reveal their bodies in the public are not unconscious from the effects of body on sight and sight on the body. If women's displaying body has nothing to do with men's gaze then men's gaze has nothing to do with the women's bodies. Men stare at women's revealing bodies and women make their bodies to be seen precisely because the body has the powers of seduction. Dress codes in all societies, particularly in organizational workplace settings are the compelling evidence in this regard. Anyhow, the writer makes it clear that it is a divine command revealed in the Holy Quran. It is the duty of women to dress properly and properly and men have right to have this duty fulfilled.

Women's autonomy and authority is constructed as associated with human rights, empowerment and economic status in the texts of humsub.com.pk. One text states that according to government of Pakistan's Vision 2025, it is necessary to surely make rural women and girls autonomous and their human rights and gender equality is necessary. Pakistani women get more opportunities in the agriculture sector. It is obvious that the state level developmental vision interlaces autonomy, human rights and gender equality:

According to the Beijing Declaration and Sustainable Development Goals and Vision 2025 of the Government of Pakistan, it is important to empower rural women and girls and ensure their human rights and gender equality. Women in Pakistan have the most employment opportunities in the agriculture sector...In the agriculture sector, women are mostly engaged in dairy and livestock work. Only nineteen percent of women work for pay and sixty percent of women do unpaid domestic responsibilities. According to SDPI research, the challenges faced by rural women are related to poverty. Inequitable access to and lack of control over land and other assets increases women's poverty. Pakistan's gender equality indicators are very poor and discriminatory laws against women still exist (Rehman, 2019).

This indicates that these three concepts are considered distinct, separate and independent from each other. It means that autonomous woman does not necessarily enjoy human rights and gender equality; woman enjoying human rights is not necessarily autonomous; even the autonomy and human rights does not ensure gender equality and so on. Above all, these concepts are to be made sure in the context of paid work for women. That is why work opportunities for women are immediately highlighted. What is not sure is that whether working in agriculture will automatically make women autonomous and equal in terms of gender. The text itself acknowledges that rural women work in the agricultural sector but that work has not achieved autonomy, human rights and gender equality for them.

Another text constructs the discourse of autonomous women in Pakistan. The text acknowledges that women are now autonomous in most of the matters particularly they are no longer dependent on women for their mobility:

According to a conservative estimate, the number of women drivers has exceeded thirty percent. While women are becoming independent in most of the cases, they have stopped depending on men to travel from one place to another and this is a welcome thing. Men's problems have also reduced considerably. Whether it is to drop off children to school, going for shopping or attending an event, women are fulfilling their responsibilities under their

own help. For this they do not feel the need to hurt the men of the house (Naqvi, 2019).

According to the discourse, there are thirty percent women drivers in Pakistan. This construction makes driving an indicator of women's autonomy but it is not clear whether these women belong to urban or rural areas; whether they drive their own vehicles or they are employed as drivers by others; whether they drive heavy vehicles or only cars and bikes. If we accept the stated gender ratio of women as at least fifty percent of the total population then 30% women drivers make a significant portion and this number is autonomous although not in all the areas. The discourse then goes on to explain the experiences of women drivers and their difficulties as they face cases of harassment. What is important for us here is that even the autonomous women are not safe from gender discrimination thus the discourses and visions of eliminating gender discrimination through autonomy fall apart.

Women's autonomy also does not ensure their happy and egalitarian marital relationships. This is evident from Atika Qureshi's discursive construction that autonomous women tend to get divorced from their husbands who tease them in different ways:

Suddenly, my father asked a question that why educated women get divorced more. In those days, a lady of our acquaintance, who was working in a bank, got divorced after almost 20 years of marriage. At the same time, a drama was playing on TV, the main character of which was an educated, independent woman who gets divorced from her husband (Qureshi, 2019).

Contrary to this, Qurat-al-Ain constructs autonomy in the economic perspective. She states that economic autonomy empowers women and this autonomy comes through education:

Economic independence gives power to women, so much power that they do not live worse than animals for two meals a day. And when the same woman challenges the man's aggressive behavior, the same woman is criminalized. It is said to be the cause of house breaking. Her education and her consciousness are blamed for her character (Yousuf, 2019).

What becomes instantly evident from these discursive constructions is that autonomy is a fleeting and floating concept the boundaries of which are not determined yet. It is anything what one wants to be it. This conceptual ambiguity and confusion is attendant in almost all the constructions. One is never sure whether it is a cause or an effect. This plasticity of the term autonomy becomes more compelling in the context of patriarchy. This construction introduces the concept autonomy of body and declares that bodily autonomous women are a threat to male dominance.

The constructions of autonomy, authority and body policing are not present at all in the texts of Daanish.pk. The constructions identified here from the other two data sources reveal the disagreements even about the status of women's body in their own perceptions. "My Body, My Will" is repeatedly and frequently mentioned in the texts but none of them has explicated what is the actual meaning of this slogan. Sometimes it appears as a choice, sometimes it becomes a threat to chastity. It is a right here, a duty there. Often it is related to productive rights but at times related to sexual consent. It is simultaneously absolute and relative. This abundant confusion or independent opinions lead to nowhere but provide a rich context for the detailed analysis of individual texts.

Discourse of Power Relations and Women Empowerment

Power is a relative concept and its sources, dynamics and workings may differ depending on the relations between and among the holders and subjects of power. One of the dominant themes in the textual data is related to the rival conceptions and perceptions of gender relations in the context of power and women's empowerment. This overall theme connects discourses with an attendant view of its associations with women's objectification.

Khalid Masood Khan presents his views about feminists particularly about the empowered women and how they use this power in their relations. According to his construction Marvi Sarmad insulted and respectable persons of the society and misbehaved regularly with them on the television but the whole society tolerated her and kept silence on her derogatory language. She kept on benefitting the advantage of being a woman and utilized this advantage generously. Men of the society respected her because she was a woman and tolerated her insidious remarks but only one man, Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar answered back and deflated the balloon of her gender discrimination. He behaved in the same as she was behaving with men. Then there was hue and cry:

For the first time, Marvi Sarmad, who raised the slogan of equality between women and men, has been treated equally and there has been an uproar in the country. For the past several years, the accused has been insulting the ideological basis of Pakistan, the constitution of Pakistan, the social outlook of the vast majority of the people of Pakistan and the collective social fabric of the country in the name of liberalism in TV programs, talk shows and in his conversations. But there was never so much anger on any of her words. The only reason was that then only men were affected by the bombardment of their language, and no one had treated the claimant of woman's equality in such a way that she could find practical proof of equality. Now for the first time she has been chased with the stick with which she has been chasing nobles for a long time (Khan, 2020).

This discursive construction of the background pictures an environment of gender relations in which women are respected irrespective of their status in the society. Generally and as an ethical custom, men do not answer back and rebuke women in the public sphere. They retreat when a woman attacks. Contrarily, usually women do not tend to fight because of shame but when a woman goes beyond the limits, a counter attack is unavoidable. These are the subtle context-specific working gender relations in the Pakistani society. This is because women have a power because of their femininity or womanhood. However, when women adopt masculine ways through this power then they lose this advantageous position precisely by leaving the feminine ground.

Afifa Khan Sadozai (Daleel.pk) criticizes the protesting attitude of women. She argues that the slogans of the Women March do not reflect the demands for rights. Women are not objectified if they are reminded their reproductive duties. No one considers that a woman is just a child producing machine. The slogans of women activists are degrading for other women. The domestic problems are to be solved at home. Domestic chores should be performed by women and this is not their objectification:

Islam has made you a Queen and given you a duty to take care of the house and train your children. If you train your children well, you will not have to go out on the road against men today...For God's sake, don't spread hatred against a specific gender. For God's sake, don't violate your values. You

must ask for your rights, but must remember that you are performing your duties well (Khan Sadozai, 2020).

Adding to this line of thought, Nabeela Shahzad (Daleel.pk) argues that only man is burdened with the economic responsibilities while the woman is assigned domestic chores. A pious woman is a precious wealth for a husband who is urged to take care of the wife:

Poor male has been given a higher rank and burden has been imposed on him. And on the other hand, there is no great responsibility for a woman except for the education of children. For a woman, everything is easy, that is, there is no worry about her livelihood...A virtuous wife is considered the most precious possession for a husband. Then, as soon as she becomes a mother, there is good news that paradise is under her feet. A mother's right to her children is declared the highest. In her home, she became a princess, then an empress, and then became the Majesty Queen (Shahzad, 2021).

Husband and wife are the particular foundational figures of the family unit in traditional societies. The familial relation transcends the imported gender conceptions. Javeria Sajid (Daleel.pk) is of the opinion that 70% of women in our society are responsible for their own harassment. This is due to the social fabric of our society in which woman has to protective layers:

Actually, I want to point out some mistakes made by women. It is important to understand them in order to solve them, because 70% of the harassment in our society is our own responsibility. We all live in such a social system, all the fabrics of which are connected with each other. First of all, women need to understand that there are two protective fences around women. The first defense line is father, husband, brother and son. The strength of this line is directly proportional to the protection of women. When women become working women, they complain against their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons and in this way the damage their own protective belt and other men manipulate this situation for their own interests. The second line of defense is women's behavior. It is a woman who determines and defines the limits of other men. Normally, no man can proceed against the consent of a woman. Overdue laughter, violation of dress code and frankness with other men makes women insecure (Sajid, 2020).

This discursive construction remains valid if the fundamental element of social fabric is acknowledged and accepted. But if the project is transform the society on other lines then these very protective belts become forts of objectification and the protectors are turned into patriarchs. It is a matter of the horizon from which one looks at the situation. This is the view held also held by Shoib Bhatti (Daleel.pk). He also argues for the same protective belts and the religion that declares women as respected and honorable members of the society. Moreover, he accuses that women rights movements and NGOs are foreign funded and they work for their agendas:

Islam is the only religion in the world that gave real freedom to women. Honored and respected women. The veil, which is a symbol of dignity and respect for women, was called oppression by these countries. Although the veil protects from dirty eyes, lustful eyes...Spreading foreign agendas and making women rebel against society's values, promoting materialism,

atheism are the main objectives of these organizations and NGOs (Bhatti, 2020).

These discourses reveal that honor, dignity and respect are the supreme values in the society and these values are normally desired and maintained by both men and women. These values can be seen as instruments of objectification and commodification by those who want independence and then demand legal protections.

The family as the protective sphere is also promoted by Shehla Khizar (Daleel.pk). She argues that movement for women freedom has made woman a market product and the slogans of women empowerment has made women vulnerable by demolishing their line of defense. Women are exploited because of deficient training and collective social behavior. Individual should be ethically trained in order to transform the society:

The so-called fame and foreign fund-hungry NGOs have completely changed the entire scenario and today it is a situation where the woman of the house frees her hand from her own house guards and close relations and flies high like a fluttering kite in the air. But she wants to fly no matter how much her bond with the center (family unit) weakens or breaks as a result of this flight...When women are made a market product in the name of feminism, by the seductive slogans of women empowerment, she is taken out of the strong fence of the house and husband and brought to the fore, as a result of which the house was a cradle of love, desire and aspirations, the same house became a terrible example of the two-sided war of rights and obligations and disintegrated (Khizar, 2020).

This construction hits the mark and reveals the fundamental ideological conflict in the theorizations of objectification of women. Women's autonomy, freedom, liberation, empowerment and gender equality are seen as dents on women's dignity by one perspective and symbols of women's objectification by the opposite perspective. One group perceives the other group as the real example of objectification. This discursivity is reinforced by Sajid Khakwani (2020) who argues that it amounts to women's exploitation to measure women with the amount of dowry or to burn her with the dead husband or to make her means of earning or to consider her an object of satisfaction or to use her smiles for the commercial purposes or to deprive her of basic human rights in the name of religion or to make her a public figure or to bring her to media screen or to drag her into parliament. Seen from the opposite perspective most of these exploitative ways might appear the concrete examples of women's autonomy and liberation and reverse of these as the true indicators of objectification of women and markers of a patriarchal society.

Sexual harassment, Talal Khalid (2019) argues, is a serious problem even in the civilized western world. He narrates some personal experiences that not only women and girls but also the boys and males face sexual harassment:

Surveys show that ninety-eight percent of people experience sexual assault. Whether it is East or West, this problem is everywhere. The difference is that the laws on sexual harassment in the East are very weak. While some parts of the civilized West have very strong anti-sexual harassment laws. However, one common problem is that at both places many cases often go unreported. It is very difficult or almost impossible for a victim of sexual harassment to tell someone or complain that they have been sexually harassed (Khalid, 2019).

This discourse goes against the discourse that only men harass women due to the dominance of patriarchal settings. In this sense, the theoretical insights of patriarchy become contestable even if they maintain that patriarchy is harmful for both genders. The discursive point to ponder is that males are not dominant due to patriarchy or there is no such thing as collective male bias against women. Contrary to this understanding, Anjum Raza (humsub.com.pk) maintains that the concept of gender equality is not acceptable to the majority of males of this society. Woman is still considered as a property of men:

The biggest problem is that the concept of equal rights for women is still not acceptable to the majority of men in these societies. A woman is still considered a man's fiefdom. It is the same in the uneducated social class, but the daily incidents even in the educated class are proof that the mainstream society's conception, thinking and attitude about the position of women has not changed (Raza, 2019).

This discourse is peculiarly under the pull of feminist theories but the sweeping generalization becomes unjustified in the light of other women's views. We have already discussed that gender equality is not acceptable even by females while some are of the view that Islam grants gender equality. Thinking women as male property is the extreme form of objectification this seems merely an exaggerated generalization. Anyhow, it depends upon what is meant by the term property. Amir Hussain Qureshi (humsub.com.pk) exposes this exaggeration that obfuscates the reality. Women are not considered an object or property but they are certainly deprived of property rights in some cases:

For example, one aspect of reality is that in Islam the testimony of two women is considered equal to that of one man, but the other aspect of reality is that this is not the case everywhere. Menstruation, lactation and childbirth etc. are some cases where the testimony of one woman is acceptable, but where there is fear of mischief and strife, the testimony of two women is considered equal to the testimony of one man (Qureshi, 2019).

Misbah Chudhary (humsub.com.pk) argues that the power to make decisions is not available even to most of men. Women's empowerment includes the right to marriage, right to do business or choose any profession of choice. These rights are granted by God but males consider these rights as a threat to their honor. There are women who willingly abrogate their own rights. Then there is the issue of economic empowerment. Islam grants property shares from the property of fathers, husbands and sons. Woman is economically dependent on men but there is nothing wrong in it as men are responsible for the finances:

The whole problem is economic. Islam empowers women economically. A woman has a share in the property of her father, husband and son, besides allowing women to take up different professions, but how many women can own their share of inheritance? Thus economically woman is dependent on man which is not wrong because it is assumed on man. In our society, the way this economic dependence is made a man's strength and a woman's weakness is not a hidden thing (Chaudhary, 2019).

Similar views are propagated by Shazaar Jelani who argues that after marriage a woman's body does not remain exclusively hers. All the changes in woman's body (sexual and reproductive changes) are caused by man. Similarly, Jelani too confirms that even men have not certain rights but our society is a heaven for women. Heaven in the sense that majority of women are not forced to work outside their homes. Livelihood is the sole responsibility of men:

In the name of right, men have cheated the women of the West. They reduced their own burden. Far from enjoying right, a woman is burdened with her responsibilities. Because a woman may say my body is my will. But after meeting a man, her body does not belong to her alone (Jelani, 2019).

Dr. Tahira Kazmi (humsub.com.pk) constructs an opposite discourse of power relations. She narrates personal instances that some professionally working women are earning higher incomes than their husbands do, however, they cannot spend their incomes at their own will:

Let us tell you some stories of working women belonging to this tribe. Some stories of highly educated women of the society i.e. doctors (Kazmi, 2019).

This discourse at the one hand, negates the dominant discourse of power relations, and the discourse of women empowerment through economic success, on the other hand. These instances reveal that economic stability or job is not sufficient guarantee to women's autonomy, freedom and power. At the same time, the discourse acknowledges that women tend to live with their husbands however dominant or cruel they are.

The discourse surrounding women's autonomy, authority, agency and freedom in Pakistan is deeply fragmented and contentious. These terms are prominently contested in the context of women's objectification and the pervasive social and cultural norms. The examination of discursive fragments from texts reveals varying interpretations and constructions of these concepts that are influenced by the broader socio-cultural and religious frameworks.

Autonomy is sparsely mentioned and is often conflated with freedom. The criticism of the Women March slogan "My Body, My Will" illustrates a profound dissonance in understanding women's demands for bodily autonomy. The argument posits that women are already autonomous because they are actively seeking autonomy, which paradoxically negates the necessity for such demands. This rhetorical maneuver is used to suggest that the activists' calls for autonomy are either redundant or misdirected. The discourse further problematizes women's public display of their bodies, interpreting it as either a bold assertion of rights or as shameless exposure, thus reinforcing the cultural stigmatization of female autonomy and agency. Muhammad Amir Khakwani's (2019) perspective on body policing reflects a traditional view, advocating for modesty and adherence to religious edicts as a means of regulating both men's and women's behavior. This viewpoint underscores a mutual responsibility but disproportionately burdens women with the onus of preventing male gaze through modest dressing. The inherent logic suggests an unchangeable natural order where men's visual impulses are uncontrollable and must be managed by women's sartorial choices.

Conversely, other authors present autonomy as intrinsically linked to human rights, empowerment and economic status, particularly emphasizing the state's role in promoting these aspects through developmental visions. However, the practical implementation of these ideals remains questionable as the autonomy gained through employment in sectors like agriculture does not necessarily translate to gender equality or human rights. The lived experiences of women drivers, while indicating a degree of mobility and autonomy also highlight persistent gender-based harassment and challenges the notion that autonomy alone can eliminate discrimination.

The discussions in the texts reveal that autonomy and economic empowerment do not guarantee egalitarian marital relationships or protection from gender-based violence.

The narratives of divorced educated women and the varying degrees of economic autonomy underscore the complex interplay between autonomy, economic independence and societal expectations. The conceptual fluidity of autonomy is evident throughout the discourses. It is a term whose meaning shifts according to the contextual usage and ideological standpoint of the speaker. This ambiguity underscores the plasticity of the term, making it simultaneously a cause and an effect, a right and a duty. The multiplicity of meanings attached to slogans like “My Body, My Will” reflects the broader societal confusion and the contested terrain of women’s rights in Pakistan.

The discourse on power, gender relations and women’s empowerment in Pakistani society too, reveals a complex and nuanced landscape shaped by traditional norms, ethical customs and evolving perceptions. Khalid Masood Khan’s (2020) observations on Marvi Sarmad and Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar exemplify a particular view of gender relations where women’s behavior in public spheres is scrutinized against societal expectations of respect and tolerance. This perspective underscores the tension between gender-specific conduct and societal norms suggesting by adopting certain aggressive behaviors women risk losing the protective advantages traditionally afforded by their femininity.

Khan Sadozai’s (2020) and Nabeela Shahzad’s (2021) discourses emphasize the value of women’s domestic roles and criticize the objectification perceived in demands for equality and empowerment. Javeria Sajid (2020) and Shoib Bhatti (2020) discuss the protective structures inherent in Pakistani society, asserting that the erosion of these structures, through women’s participation in the workforce or through behaviors deemed inappropriate, leads to increased vulnerability and objectification. This viewpoint is contrasted with the feminist perspective, which sees such protective belts as instruments of patriarchal control and gender-based oppression. The discourse also touches on the economic dimensions of gender relations, with perspectives like that of Dr. Tahira Kazmi (2019) highlighting that economic success alone does not guarantee autonomy and empowerment for women. This complexity is echoed in the narratives that challenge the dominant discourse of male oppression and the simplistic dichotomy of empowered versus objectified women.

In essence, the debate around women’s empowerment in Pakistan is multifaceted, involving ethical, cultural and economic dimensions. It reflects an ideological conflict where traditional views on gender roles clash with modern feminist ideals. This discourse underscores that the quest for gender equality and women’s empowerment must navigate the delicate balance between preserving cultural values and advancing women’s rights. The varied perspectives presented illustrate the ongoing struggle to redefine power dynamics in a way that respects both individual autonomy and societal norms.

Conclusion

Various proponents and opponents for the discourses on women’s objectification selected a variety of discursive fragments and analyzed them to reveal the diverse interpretations of women’s autonomy, authority, agency and freedom in Pakistan. They examined the pervasive social and cultural norms that shape these discourses, highlighting how these norms contribute to women’s objectification. These discourses demonstrated the dissonance between perceived and actual autonomy. The authors presented both traditional and modern viewpoints, such as advocacy for modesty and religious adherence as a means to regulate behavior and counteract male gaze, versus feminist perspectives that view these regulations as patriarchal control. This approach allowed them to challenge and construct the narratives by juxtaposing opposing viewpoints and revealing the socio-cultural underpinnings that influence these discourses. The authors presented arguments

for women's autonomy by linking it to human rights, empowerment and economic status, emphasizing the state's role in promoting these aspects. They highlighted practical challenges, such as the gap between employment in sectors like agriculture and actual gender equality. Against these discourses, they discussed traditional views that see public displays of autonomy as shameless and immodest. Counterarguments included the perspective that autonomy does not necessarily lead to protection from gender-based violence or egalitarian marital relationships. Aggressive behaviors by women in public could undermine their traditional protective advantages. The authors provided a complex view by contrasting these with feminist critiques that see such protective structures as instruments of control. The counter-arguments and refutations presented by the authors were coherent and justified. They effectively illustrated the complexities of the discourse on women's autonomy and empowerment in Pakistan. By presenting both traditional and feminist perspectives, they demonstrated the multifaceted nature of the issue. The authors justified their refutations by drawing on specific examples, such as the varied interpretations of the Women March slogan "My Body, My Will" and the lived experiences of women in different socio-economic contexts. Their analysis highlighted the ambiguity and fluidity of the concept of autonomy, showing how it is both context-dependent and ideologically driven. This balanced approach underscored the ongoing struggle to reconcile traditional norms with modern feminist ideals, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced in advancing women's rights in Pakistan.

Recommendations

Based on the discursive contradictions and conceptual ambiguities identified in this analysis, the following recommendations are forwarded for scholars, activists, and public intellectuals engaged in the discourse on women's rights in Pakistan.

First, it is imperative to cultivate greater conceptual precision. The analysis reveals that foundational terms such as 'autonomy' and 'empowerment' are employed with such ideological fluidity that they lose analytical utility and become sites of perpetual contestation. Stakeholders in this debate should endeavor to move beyond evocative but ambiguous slogans and towards an explicit articulation of their operational definitions. This would mitigate the discursive confusion that currently allows for the paradoxical interpretations highlighted in the texts.

Second, proponents of women's rights should engage in a critical self-reflection of their own discursive strategies. This study demonstrates that certain rhetorical maneuvers and public-facing arguments, while intended to be liberatory, can be discursively re-appropriated to reinforce the very objectification they seek to dismantle. A strategic re-evaluation of these techniques is necessary to preempt counter-productive interpretations and to avoid unintentionally perpetuating the focus on the female body as the primary locus of the debate.

Finally, for researchers and media analysts, a crucial path forward involves problematizing the entrenched binary between 'traditional' and 'feminist' perspectives. Merely documenting this discursive clash is insufficient. Future analysis should seek to deconstruct this opposition itself, identifying alternative or nascent frameworks that are not predicated on this rigid ideological structure. Such scholarly work could contribute to fostering a more substantive dialogue that transcends the current discursive stalemate.

References

- Ali, S., & Majeed, A. (2018). Problems and possibilities in reconciling Islam and gender equality policies in Pakistan. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, 8(1), 93-104. <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.81.07>.
- Anderson, K. (2014). *Modern misogyny: Anti-feminism in a post-feminist era*. Oxford University Press.
- Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. Routledge.
- Bhatti, S. (2020, March 15). *Almi Youm-e-Khawateen aur Muslim Khawateen k Huqooq*. Daleel.pk. <https://daleel.pk/2020/03/15/132883>
- Blake, K., Bastian, B., & Denson, T. (2016). Perceptions of low agency and high sexual openness mediate the relationship between sexualization and sexual aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, 42(6), 483-497. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21644>.
- Bue, A. C., & Harrison, K. (2019). Empowerment sold separately: Two experiments examine the effects of ostensibly empowering beauty advertisements on women's empowerment and self-objectification. *Sex Roles*, 81, 627-642. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01028-y>.
- Calogero, R. M. (2013). Objects Don't Object: Evidence That Self-Objectification Disrupts Women's Social Activism. *Psychological Science*, 24(3), 312-318. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612452574>.
- Chaudhary, M. (2019, March 8). *Aurtoon k huqooq ki jang*. Humsub.com.pk. <https://www.humsub.com.pk/219614/misbah-chaudhry-2/>
- Cherkasskaya, E., & Rosario, M. (2019). The relational and bodily experiences theory of sexual desires in women. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 48(6), 1659-1681. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1212-9>.
- Choi, D., & DeLong, M. (2019). Defining Female Self-Sexualization for the Twenty-First Century. *Sexuality & Culture*, 23, 1350-1371. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09617-3>.
- Curie, D. H., Kelly, D. M., & Pomerantz, S. (2009). *'Girl power': Girls reinventing girlhood*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Erchull, M., & Liss, M. (2014). The Object of One's Desire: How Perceived Sexual Empowerment Through Objectification is Related to Sexual Outcomes. *Sexuality & Culture*, 18, 773-788. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-013-9216-z>.
- Fairclough, N. (1993). Critical Discourse Analysis and the Marketization of Public Discourse: The Universities. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 133-168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002002>.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and Power*. Routledge.

- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. Routledge.
- Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*. Routledge.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T.-A. (1997). Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 173–206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>.
- Gervais, S., Sáez, G., Riemer, A., & Klein, O. (2020). The Social Interaction Model of Objectification: A process model of goal-based objectifying exchanges between men and women. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 59, 248–283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12339>.
- Gill, R. (2008). Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising. *Feminism & Psychology*, 18(1), 35–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353507084950>.
- Gill, R. (2009). Beyond the 'sexualization of culture' thesis: An intersectional analysis of 'sixpacks', 'midriffs' and 'hot lesbians' in advertising. *Sexualities*, 12, 137–160.
- Griffin, C., Szmigin, I., Bengry-Howell, A., Hackley, C., & Mistral, W. (2013). Inhabiting the contradictions: Hypersexual femineity and the culture of intoxication among young women in the UK. *Feminism & Psychology*, 23, 184–206. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353512468860>.
- Grower, P., & Ward, L. M. (2021). Differentiating contributions of self-objectification and self-sexualization to young women's sexual agency. *Body Image*, 38, 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2021.03.005>.
- Henry, F., & Tator, C. (2002). *Discourses of domination: Racial bias in the Canadian English-language press*. University of Toronto Press.
- Jelani, S. (2019, March 11). *Aurtoon ki jannat maen bechara mard*. Humsub.com.pk. <https://www.humsub.com.pk/220157/syed-shazar-jilani-4/>
- Kazmi, T. (2019, June 24). *Mazhar Bodla ka mazloom dost aur aurat gardi ka afsana*. Humsub.com.pk. <https://www.humsub.com.pk/249158/tahira-kazmi-35/>
- Khakwani, M. A. (2019, September 20). *Hijab ka masla, mard wa khawateen kia karen*. Daleel.pk. <https://daleel.pk/2019/09/20/112297>
- Khakwani, S. (2020, March 5). *Insani muashray mein khawateen ka muqam*. Daleel.pk. <https://daleel.pk/2020/03/05/131760>
- Khalid, T. (2019). *Jinsi harasani masla hae, sangeen masla!* Humsub.com.pk. <https://www.humsub.com.pk/233771/talal-khalid-2/>
- Khan Sadozia, A. (2020, March 10). *Aurat Azadi March*. Daleel.pk. <https://daleel.pk/2020/03/10/132273>
- Khan, K. M. (2020, March 10). *Meri marzi... Athar Shah Khan Jedi ki aik ghazal*. Daleel.pk. <https://daleel.pk/2020/03/10/132381>

- Khizar, S. (2020, March 9). *Youm-e-Khawateen Khud hi Istehsal ka Shikar ho gia*. Daleel.pk. <https://daleel.pk/2020/03/09/131829>
- Langlois, J. H., Kalakanis, L., Rubenstein, A. J., Larson, A., Hallam, H., & Smoot, M. (2000). Maxims or myths of beauty? A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(3), 390-423.
- Majeed, A., & Malik, R. (2022). Feminist Objectification: Critical Discourse Analysis of Feminist Criticism of Traditional Spousal Sexual Discourses and Practices. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 4(2), 658-667.
- Mckay, A., Moore, S., & Kubik, W. (2019). Empowerment without Feminism? Sexual Objectification Post-feminist Style. *International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies*, 7(1), 69-78. <https://doi.org/10.15640/ijgws.v7n1p9>.
- Moradi, B., & Huang, Y.-P. (2008). Objectification theory and psychology of women: a decade of advances and future directions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 32, 377-398.
- Murnen, S. K., & Smolak, L. (2012). Social considerations related to adolescent girls' sexual empowerment: A response to Lamb and Peterson. *Sex Roles*, 66, 725-735. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0079-1>.
- Naqvi, S. Z. (2019, March 19). *Khawateen drivers ka tanqeed sy harassment tak ka safar*. Humsub.com.pk. <https://www.humsub.com.pk/202616/sana-naqvi-9/>
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1995). Objectification. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 24(4), 249-291.
- Peterson, Z. D. (2010). What is sexual empowerment? A multidimensional and process oriented approach to adolescent girls' sexual empowerment. *Sex Roles*, 62, 307-313. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-009-9725-2>.
- Qureshi, A. (2019, January 18). *Parhi likhi khawateen ko talaq ziada kiyun hoti hae?* Humsub.com.pk. <https://www.humsub.com.pk/215921/atika-qaureshi-5/>
- Qureshi, A. H. (2019, March 18). *Aurtoon k huqooq: Haqeeqat ka aik pehloo*. Humsub.com.pk. <https://www.humsub.com.pk/221370/amir-hussain-qaureshi/>
- Raza, A. (2019). *Pakistani Aurtoon ka din: 12 February*. Humsub.com.pk. <https://www.humsub.com.pk/212940/anjum-raza-2/>
- Rehman, M. (2019, April 24). *Dehi aurtoon k masail*. Humsub.com.pk. <https://www.humsub.com.pk/232232/mahnaz-rehman-7/>
- Sajid, J. (2020, October 1). *Khawateen ki harassment ka aik pehlu*. Daleel.pk. <https://daleel.pk/2020/10/01/147949>
- Shahzad, N. (2021, March 2). *Khawateen ka din kiyun manaaien*. Daleel.pk. <https://daleel.pk/2021/03/02/150847>
- Stuart, A., & Donaghue, N. (2011). Choosing to conform: The complexities of choice discourses in relation to feminine beauty practices. *Feminism & Psychology*, 22(1), 98-121.

- Tolman, D. L. (2012). Female adolescents, sexual empowerment and desire: A missing discourse of gender inequity. *Sex Roles*, 66, 746–757. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-012-0122x>.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1988). *News as discourse*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2000). *Ideology and Discourse: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*. Pompeu Fabra University.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse & Society*, 17(3), 359-383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506060250>.
- Wilde, M. D., Carrier, A., Casini, A., & Demoulin, S. (2020). The Drawback of Sexual Empowerment: Perceiving Women as Emancipated but Still as Sexual Objects. *Sex Roles*, 84, 626–643. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-020-01192-4>.
- Yousuf, Q. (2019, June 24). *Talaq ki waja aurat ki adam bardasht hae ya suhoor?* Humsub.com.pk. <https://www.humsub.com.pk/237773/quratulain-yousaf-4/>