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**Reinforcement of Patriarchal Structures in Pakistani Society:
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Chinoy's *A Girl in The River:
The Price of Forgiveness***

Abstract:

This study has investigated how the language in Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy's Oscar-winning documentary A Girl in the River: The price of forgiveness assigns different gender roles to men and women. The analysis was carried out using a qualitative method based on the approach of critical discourse analysis. In this regard, Reisigl and Wodak's referential strategies (2001) and Walby's theory of patriarchy (1990) were used as the theoretical framework of the study, which also provided us with the tools to conduct an in-depth analysis. The findings of this study reveal that the documentary orbits around the theme of patriarchy. With the help of strategies of critical discourse analysis such as spatialization, somatization, the findings show that the language of men, e.g. Saba's father Maqsood, her uncle and even the elderly neighbor exercise power not only on her but also on other women in their families. Overall, the documentary attempted to challenge the prevalent patriarchal structures in the society, however; it paradoxically ends up reinforcing them by framing a firm system of patriarchy where men have been given more agency not only in domestic affairs but also in social and legal spheres.

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Introduction

This research examines dominant patriarchal structures in Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy's Oscar-winning documentary *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*. The documentary revolves around the life of a village girl, Saba, whose attempt to marry her former fiancée against her family's will incurs attempts on her life by the male members of the family. The apparent purpose of the documentary seems to challenge the notion of patriarchy, yet a careful examination brings out how it is reinforcing the notion of patriarchy throughout its course. From the way women are being represented, through their physical appearance, domestic settings, economic conditions and dependence upon men in various personal and social affairs, to the extent of thematic conclusions that can plausibly be drawn from watching the movie, it portrays patriarchy as a norm which is justified in more than one way.

Research Questions

1. How language is used to assign gender roles to men and women in the documentary?
2. How the language of 'The Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness' frames a system of patriarchy?

Theoretical Lens

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an area of study which was developed simultaneously with other critical studies in the field of social sciences. Van Dijk (1998) contends that Critical Discourse Analysis is concerned with the analysis of both written as well as spoken texts. It aims to reveal not only the discursive sources of power but how these sources are used to create dominance, bias, and social inequality. In this regard, Breeze (2011) postulates that CDA has now firmly established itself as a field not only in social sciences and humanities but in other disciplines as well. CDA can be differentiated from other disciplines due to its critical nature. Wodak and Meyer (2003) contend that CDA is not only concerned with the analysis or distribution of power as a central notion in social life, it also strives to form a theory aiming at analyzing language with a premise that power is a central condition in social life. This study has taken Resigl and Wodak's (2001) referential strategies of Spatialization, Somatization, Linguistic Exclusion and Fairclough's (1995) metaphor for the analysis of language to investigate how different characters use language to not only negotiate power relations but also to assign gender roles to each other. In addition, to seek an in-depth view of patriarchy in *The Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*, the researchers have also used Sylvia Wallby's (1990) theory of patriarchy. The strategies used for this research have been discussed below.

Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) Referential Strategies

Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) borrowed referential strategies from Van Leeuwen (1993, 1996). As mentioned above, the researchers found that Spatialization, Somatization and Linguistic Exclusion are the appropriate and relevant strategies to conduct the analysis of this research.

- a) **Somatization** is a vast category including twelve sub-categories. Somatization refers to the use of language which refers to social actors with a focus on their physical or body characteristic and the said use of language is alienating and derogatory in nature. This research has used the sub-category of 'engendering' which is used to create an alienating effect on a certain gender using words like 'man, woman, girl or boy' Reisigl and Wodak's (2001). Van Leeuwen (2008) further added to this idea and contended that somatization is a strategy which is used to add a touch of alienation because it is a form of objectivation (p.60).
- b) **Spatialization** refers to a use of language which presents social actors in an impersonalized setting with reference to a place with which they have a close relation/association. This category is realized with: toponyms which include words to refer to a place, town or state for people of the out-groups and anthroponyms which include words for reference to a place where people of out-group live such as occupier, inhabitant, resident or dweller. Renkema (2009) exemplifies this idea of objectivation through the strategy of spatialization and states: "Australia is generous to a fault" (p.294). This example shows that an anthroponym has been used to refer to a place and to attach a certain stereotype to it. De-spatialization on the other hand is a referential strategy in which social actors use language to attach de-toponymic anthroponyms with social actors of other groups. For instance: African, foreigner, Outlander, etc. It is an extension of spatialization. Despatialisation also includes de-adverbial anthroponyms for people of out-groups including words like an outsider, insider, etc. Reisigl and Wodak's (2001).
- c) **Linguistic Exclusion** is realized with the help of grammatical and semantic categories. This strategy is realized when certain social actors are denied their right to use language. There is either clamant ignoring or certain under-representation of social actors of out-groups. Reisigl and Wodak's (2001). In this regard, Van Leeuwen (2008) asserts that representation can be inclusion and exclusion and both used to serve the interest or purposes of certain people in power in the society. Exclusion according to him is a very significant strategy of CDA,

because the usage of this strategy is mostly an attempt to suppress the facts (p.41).

Fairclough and Metaphor

Fairclough (2003) opines that discourses can be analyzed with the help of metaphor in the sense of ‘lexical metaphor’. i.e. the words which are generally used to represent one part of the word which is extended to another. He exemplifies this idea using the metaphor of ‘planetary dimension’ to describe a ‘game’ and states: “The pace has become swifter and the game has taken on planetary dimensions” (p. 153). Here the metaphorical comparison has been drawn between the pace of the game and the movement of the planet to suggest that the game being played is not reaching to its end because no one is winning. In this regard, he contended that metaphors are used for the production of unique representations of the world. These representations are socially motivated. He further contended that different metaphor corresponds to distinct perspectives and interests of social actors, thus have different ideological manifestations.

Wallby’s Theory of Patriarchy

Wallby (1990) contends that there are six structures: ‘paid employment, household production, culture, sexuality, violence, and state’. She opines that they are responsible for the patriarchal mode of production. Relevant structures in this study are household production, violence, and state.

- a. **Household Production:** According to Hartmann (1979) women work more than men in their houses even if they work regular jobs. This inequality actually puts them in a vulnerable position putting them at a disadvantaged position both at work and home. Furthermore, even if they don’t work they do household chores ranging from cleaning, cooking and taking care of their children. Women are expected to carry out all this for their husbands who expropriate them. In a patriarchal setup, women are not rewarded monetarily or in any other way which creates inequality, paving way for men to exercise power over them (Wallby, 1990).
- b. **Violence** practiced by men mostly is an individual phenomenon. A study by West et al. (1978) considers violence as a product of the psychological problem. Wallby (1990) contends that violence is also a patriarchal structure. Men in a patriarchal setup opt for violence to practice power over women. This power is constituted with the help of a number of practices including beating, rape, flashing, sexual assault of harassment.
- c. **State**, according to Wallby (1990), is another patriarchal structure. Women are not given access to the resources of the state. There is often

the less direct presence of women in the state and as a result, they have a lack of power within the social setup due to gendered political forces. “Patriarchal closure against women in the key decisional arenas of the state can be found in a variety of constituent” (ibid, p.33). Wasti (2011) discusses this patriarchal closure in Pakistani society and the role of the state in it in the light of honor killing. He postulates that offense of murder in name of honor is not a crime against the legal order of Pakistani state, but a crime against the family of the victim. Since most of the times honor killing is a crime committed by the family of the victim there is virtual immunity for the offender which makes it easy for people to kill women.

Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature and Chinoy’s documentary *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* has been analyzed using Wallby’s theory of patriarchy (1990), Reisigl and Wodak’s Referential Strategies (2001) and the strategy of metaphor (Fairclough, 2003). Researchers have used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework for this study. The parameter of this study is limited to the analysis of the language to investigate how the discourse of the documentary not only assigns gender roles to men and women but also frames a system of patriarchy.

Findings of the Study

Careful and in-depth analysis of the language of the documentary shows that although the apparent purpose of the documentary seems to challenge the notion of patriarchy, it ends up reinforcing the notion of patriarchy in many ways. The women’s dress patterns, the domestic settings in which they are shown and their economic conditions, all of them place in a position of dependence over the male members of the family and the society. One of the most plausible conclusions of the documentary is Saba’s surrender to the over-arching influence/ power of the male members in her setting, which shows that even at the end of a socio-legal fight, the only option a woman has left with is to surrender her. One of the many reasons behind Saba’s surrender is her decision to assume the role of a mother, and attach her hopes to giving a better life to her (female) child; this compromise is a conclusive betrayal of a woman’s weakness in a patriarchal setting, and the documentary leans on it to justify the ‘compromise’.

1. System of Patriarchy

Wallby (1990) defines “patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (20). According to her, patriarchy is basically a system because this system aims at rejecting the idea of

biological determinism and imposes cultural differences on both, men and women (ibid).

i. Male Violence

Wallby (1990) defines male violence as a patriarchal structure. Furthermore, she contends that men use violence to exercise their power over women. In *A Girl in the river: The Price of forgiveness*, the language of various characters reveals that violence is a regular social form and this power is related to the normal patterns of behavior of all the men in the documentary. There are various factors which contribute to men's easy access to violence as an aid to practice dominance over women. The documentary reveals that it is because of the society as well as the lack of intervention by the state. The first instance of violence is an attempted murder on Saba's life in the name of honor just because she marries a boy name Kaisar against her family's will. She states that she was 'beaten' and 'shot' by her uncle and her father which is not only an act of violence but an attempt to strengthen the patriarchal structure in the society.

In the documentary, the reporter asks Saba's father about his wife's reaction and he narrates the whole incident: "I have gone and killed your daughter as per my desire." My wife cried. What else could she do?Whatever I had to do, I did on my own. I'm her husband. She is just my wife" [15:49]. Saba's mother does not answer back as she understands that her husband's authority over violence might as well extend to her. The attempt on Saba's life is literal as well as metaphorical: the message is clear to the rest of the women who fall in his domain. The use of expressions e.g. 'My wife', 'I did', 'on my own', 'just my wife' clearly show the expression of authority and a male-dominated discourse which apparently seems to include little respect for the opposite gender.

Saba's mother, like all other women in the documentary, is shown as a helpless woman who cannot do anything for her own daughter. Her language in the documentary reveals that she is against the attempt on her daughter's life by her husband, but she is helpless as all the agency is given to men. She states: "I am her mother. I could have scolded her, tried to make her understand, but my husband's eyes went red with anger" [12:44]. Her statement is quite revelatory: although she did not completely support her husband's decision to murder Saba, she did not have the means/courage to stand in his way.

ii. State

In the documentary, the position of women can be seen as contributing to the patriarchal setup. The way Saba's character is presented helps the audience understand that she does not have a say in any matter. Even after her father attempts on her life, she is forced by society to reconcile with him against her will.

The submissive role of the state and lack of legal action against Saba's culprit strengthen the idea that the state itself is a patriarchal structure which reinforces patriarchy through its role.

Wallby (1990) contended that women are not given access to the resources of the state. Saba's pro bono lawyer Asad Jamal states:

"Honor Killing under the Pakistani law should be treated as a murder, and the case should be prosecuted in the court of law as any other murder case. But what happens is that in most cases near relatives, who are allowed under law, can forgive the accused..... It's a question of public policy, whether in such cases compromise or forgiveness should be allowed or not. But seeking justice is a long-drawn process and women are at a great social and institutional disadvantage. Women in Pakistani society live as a second-grade citizen, or perhaps even worse" [19:50]

This statement is critical in nature because it reveals how women's lack of access to the state resources is used against her and, therefore, she is denied justice. In the documentary, women do not have an equal share of legal power with men because of the unfair distribution of legal rights. Saba is not given fair representation and this is proven at the end when her lawyer was changed without consulting her. This is another example of patriarchal closure against her. She states: "The Elders have changed my lawyer. They have taken away the old one. My old lawyer gave me good advice. He was good to me. But the new lawyer has not even spoken to me" [31:06].

Change of Saba's counsel without her consent sheds light on her state of helplessness. Saba does not have a say in the case in which she is fighting against people who attempted on her life. In the statement above, the word 'elders' refer to the male members of the family having the decision making power. Text of the documentary reveals that these elders include the brother of Saba's husband and elder members of the neighborhood. The absence of a female lawyer (there could have been a female lawyer) and female police investigators are also problematic. The power of men to decide the fate of Saba is yet another way in which the documentary under analysis paradoxically reinforces patriarchy. Due to the submissive role of the state, strings of the law are in the hands of men, which paves a way for further discrimination against women.

iii. Household Production

Wallby (1990) opines that men in a patriarchal setup expropriate the labor of women in their house. They exploit their household relationship and their marriage. Women are expected to perform an array of tasks including taking care of children, cooking, and cleaning. This labor is free and women are not rewarded

monetarily. In *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*, men are shown as the providers of bread and butter and women are limited to the household chores. Saba suffers an attempt on her life because she steps out of the household and tries to marry according to her own choice. Her father states: “I labored and earned lawfully to feed her. What she did was unlawful for me Why should she go? Was she dying of hunger? Didn’t she get fed there three times a day? She got the bed, bread, and butter, she got everything” [14:16]. Here the division of labor is creating a differentiation between men and women because it is responsible for the production of inequality. The above statement by Saba’s father reveals that he is exercising power over the women of his family because he is providing them with bread and butter.

2. Spatialization

Throughout the courses of the documentary, the language of different characters reveal that they are assigned roles and their space is delimited, and if they try to step out of their space they disturb the social balance which has consequences. Saba’s own mother, Maqsooda, compares Saba with her sisters and states: “If she stays home, I will get her married in a good way. Then I would be respected too” [13:16]. Here an **anthroponym** ‘home’ is used to define the space of women in society.

Similarly, Saba’s father objectivizes the role of women in general. He states: “Sister, Islam doesn’t permit the girl to go out of the house” [15:21]. Here Saba’s father, Maqsood, presents all women with reference to a place and delimit their social space in the society. He uses the **anthroponym** of the ‘house’ to refer to a place where women should be bound to. Language of the documentary reveals that Saba disturbs the social balance because she has stepped out of her defined boundary and eloped with an outsider.

In the documentary, the Reporter asks Saba’s father a question: ‘Does Islam permit murder?’ [15:33] and he states: “No, it is not written in the Quran. But where is it written that a girl can run away with a stranger?” [15:36]. Saba’s father labels her lawful husband as ‘stranger’. The use of **de-adverbial anthroponym** here suggests that Qaiser (Saba’ husband) is viewed as an outsider and Saba’s relation with him has caused a disturbance in the social balance.

3. Somatization

The title of the documentary: *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* is metaphorical in nature as it uses **genderonym** ‘girl’. Here the strategy of Somatization is in action because the title of the documentary is synecdochic in nature because it is not only highlighting a certain characteristic of a human being it is also calling on the meronymic semantic relationship. The word ‘girl’ has been

used for 10 times in the documentary in different instances of language. These instances reveal that the characters in the documentary focus more on a set of socially constructed gender roles without questioning the authenticity of those expectations. The focus is on the the +human feature and less on the human one because with the help of **genderonym** the characters in the documentary define gender roles. The focus here is on the classification of social actor i.e. a girl who has a fixed identity and a fixed boundary. Her identity is an extension of her father's identity and she is not allowed to assume any other identity without his consent. She is not taken as a human here, but a 'girl' which is a +human feature.

4. Use of Metaphors

Bhopal (1997) contended that patriarchy in simple terms is a 'system of dominance' in which male members of the family or society practice dominance over women and children in both public and private spheres of life. He asserts that men's patriarchal dominance over women is the 'primary power relationship in human society. In light of the concept of patriarchal dominance, we can assume that men in Saba's family are using the term 'honor' to define their patriarchal dominance. Saba's decision of eloping has tarnished the public image of the men in her family; she has presumably broken the rules created by men in a patriarchal world. Therefore, she has been subjected to violence as a punishment. The character of Saba's father forces the notion of patriarchy in the documentary. He tells the interviewer, during the film, that whatever he did was for the good of her family and Saba herself. Till the end, there is no perceptible change in his point of view. Rather, he thinks that by trying to murder Saba he had restored back his family's honor. Here, the concept of honor may be seen as a metaphor for social approval and is not based on any sound social or ethical grounds.

5. Linguistic Exclusion

Another contributing factor in strengthening the role of men in a patriarchal setup is of linguistic exclusion of women. In *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*, Saba's voice along with the voice of other women is suppressed and blatantly ignored repeatedly. Saba is dependent on her husband Qaiser and he cannot favor her against the will of his family. In the documentary, she states: "Qaiser is against the settlement. He does not favor it. But it's his elder brother who handles things" [25:50]. This statement reveals that Saba's will is blatantly ignored and she has been excluded to make the most important decision of her life. As discussed above, her legal counsel was also changed without her consent which further strengthens the notion of patriarchy. The overall discourse of the documentary reveals that women are not a part of a meaningful family or social interactions and decision-making.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study are relevant to the socio-cultural realities of contemporary Pakistani society in general. The Global Gender Gap Report issued in 2016 reveals that Pakistan ranks on 143rd out of 144 countries on the gender inequality index. Furthermore, the portrayal of women reinforces the idea that how seemingly pro-women representations turn out to be anti-women, owing to their dependence upon inherently marginalizing structures. The findings reveal that it is not possible to render such an important and complicated issue in a simplistic way. A careful study of the documentary shows multiple discursive practices at work at various levels. When considered in the light of such strategies as ‘spatialization’ and ‘somatization’ etc., the documentary appears to be, somehow, betraying its initial intent: that of critiquing patriarchy. It is revealed, on the other hand, that the documentary is technically a weak attempt at highlighting the ordeals of the victims, and actually brings together countless justifications for the existence of patriarchy and its practices and the processes of victimization.

The portrayal of women is also problematic in the sense that they are not given any real power in the documentary: they have no say in economic matters; they are bound to their homes, and are not strong enough to stand the violence against them. Even the story of Saba is one of failure and surrender. The other women in the documentary are also likewise. They are considered as the other or second sex. Even the law is designed to facilitate men in matters of honor killing and such. It gives men this space by which even when acted against they emerge out victorious. Social pressure mostly compels women to cave in favor of men because that is the only way social fabric can be preserved. The absence of a female lawyer and female police investigators in Saba’s case is also problematic. All the documentary manages to do is to divide men into types such as ‘good men’ and ‘bad men’, and there is no way Saba can fight one set without the help of the other. By the end of the documentary Saba has been shown surrendering her will to the judgment of the males around. The agreement which is reached at the end is not what Saba wanted, but then this is what her husband’s brother, the elder, and bread-winner of the family, wanted.

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