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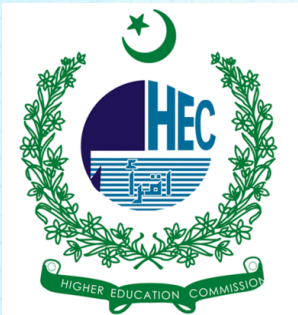
**CONSTRUCTING MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY THROUGH  
PROVERBS: A FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF  
PASHTUN CULTURE**

**Ms. Maria Afzal<sup>\*1</sup>, Dr. Saira Batool<sup>2</sup>**

*\*<sup>1</sup>PhD Scholar, IIUI*

*<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, IIUI*

*<sup>\*1</sup>afzalmaria951@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>saira.batool@iiu.edu.pk*



## Abstract

*In this study, the discursive construction of femininity and masculinity in Pashtun society within the honor-shame cultural context is analysed. Using a combination of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) (Michelle Lazar 2006) as methods and analytical framework, together with the theory of gender performativity developed by Judith Butler and the view of self-presentation developed by Erving Goffman, the study looks at the role of the proverbs as discursive spaces in which means of gender are produced, normalized, and reproduced. Overall, a corpus of around 25 Pashto proverbs related to concepts of honour, shame, modesty, authority and social legitimacy was selected and analyzed using two analytical methods: latent content analysis to generate themes, and FCDA to conduct a critical deconstruction of the proverbs. An analysis of the representation of masculine and feminine identity reveals that feminine identity is globally tied to familial honor and potential familial shame. In contrast, masculine identity is defined by authority, leadership, and social legitimacy. The results of the study show that proverbs are not simply cultural artefacts, but active devices of discourse which legitimise patriarchal ideology and reproduce gendered power relations in the cultural code of Pashtunwali. This research further advances feminist discourse on language, culture, gender and power within the Pashtun social context.*

*Keywords: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Pashto proverbs, gender performativity, Pashtunwali, honor-shame, patriarchal ideology, discourse and power*

## INTRODUCTION

Language is always ideologically charged. The feminist approach emphasises discourse as the primary tool for the construction and perpetuation of gendered social realities, fostering ideologies that define women's and men's experiences as women and men within a particular cultural framework (Lomotey & Chachu, 2020; Fatima et al., 2025). Gender inequalities in the everyday language of the community are justified and reinforced. The ordinary language of the community is an effective, though subtle, vehicle for supporting and legitimizing gender inequalities. With a distinct prominence in this free-flowing discursive environment, it is here that proverbs are portrayed as a pool of collective wisdom carrying the pragmatic meanings of ideologies from one generation to the next, while concealing their educational function in a layer of cultural authenticity (Sarwar & Arslan, 2024; Ali et al., 2023).

In Pashtun society, proverbs reflect the Pashtunwali social ethos, which includes values such as honor (nang), hospitality, courage, loyalty, and social responsibility (Ali et al., 2023). The proverbs do much more than mirror social reality; they contribute to shaping it in certain ways: femininity is negatively defined through modesty, silence and the defence of the family honour, whereas masculinity is posited through the language of authority, bravery and social control (Mahmood & Ebensgaard Jensen, 2024; Ullah, 2023). Because proverbial discourse is so commonplace, it's an urgent field of critical inquiry within feminist discourse.

The first author did not have to consider these sayings as culturally remote, for she is a Pashtun woman. Influential in daily relationships, in rules/sanctions on behaviours, voice and self-presentation from earliest childhood. The lived positionality is the source of the critical focus of this study; the proverbs are not just cultural products but acts of discursive power that construct, confine and norm gendered lives. Due to this insiderness, the interpretive aspect of the analysis also has an advantage: it rests on an experience of culture rather than on the analysis of language.

Previous scholarship has calculated Pashto proverbs on either semantic or pragmatic basis (Ali et al., 2023; Ullah, 2023), but to date there has been no scholarship that applies Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to critically get to the bottom of pro- To fill this gap, the present study tries to investigate the discursive construction of femininity and masculinity in Pashto's proverb through two approaches in latent content analysis and FCDA, where proverb is regarded as an ideological text wherein language, power, gender and culture are amalgamated.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Proverbs play a fundamental role in the Pashtun oral tradition as a miniature form of wisdom, conveying moral and social values handed down from generation to generation (Sarwar & Arslan 2024). They are short, metaphorical, and gain authority from their brevity; they teach behavior and confirm social norms in the community (Ali et al., 2023). Proverbs are not expressions, but discursive objects that are part of historical, cultural and ideological processes, serving as effective means of socio-cultivation and the realization of identity.

Pashtunwali is an ideology that shapes gendered expectations in the domains of honour, shame, modesty, obedience, bravery, and authority, positioning Pashtuns to respond to changes in their gender relations (Mohammed & Ebensgaard Jensen, 2024). These expectations are reinforced and repeated many times in social interactions, where gender is performed and evaluated in social and family contexts (Kim et al., 2019; Lomotey & Chachu, 2020). Proverbial discourse often conveys a message that secures images for women involving moral attributes and multiple moral responsibilities, but images for men involving power and rationality, and thus equates socially constructed gender norms as culturally inevitable (Khan, 2021; Ullah, 2023).

Even with the emerging literature on proverbs and gender, there has been a lack of attention to analyzing proverbial discourse through a critical lens to expose how it operates as an active mechanism that immediately reproduces patriarchal discourse within the specific honor-shame structure of Pashtunwali. Though some work on the Pashto proverb has examined cultural interpretations and semantic analysis, there is a lack of studies exploring the ideological and power-laden aspects of the proverb's meaning-making process (Ali et al., 2023; Ullah, 2023).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do Pashto proverbs discursively construct femininity and masculinity within the honor-shame framework of Pashtunwali?
2. What discursive strategies and ideological mechanisms are deployed in Pashto proverbs to naturalize and reproduce patriarchal gender norms?
3. How do Pashto proverbs function as instruments of gendered social control, regulating the performances of femininity and masculinity in everyday Pashtun social life?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Proverbs have been studied for centuries as key cultural and linguistic features that preserve collective memory, values, and social philosophies. Furthermore, in societies where oral communication remains highly prevalent influence everyday communication and socialization (Sarwar & Arslan, 2024). In this cross-cultural analysis of proverbs in Pashto and English, Ali et al. (2023) reveal that proverbial texts in Pashto are tightly bound up with honor, hierarchy and communal morality and that they function as tools for communicating shared social norms as a situated practice.

The proverbs have been the subject of increasing scholarship examining them in the context of gender ideology. In a comparative analysis of Malaysian and Korean proverbs, Kim et al. (2019) find that there is a tendency for women to be negatively represented as weak in emotional terms or as weak in moral terms, while men are positively represented as “Authoritative”, “Rational”, and “Leadership oriented”. The article cross-culturally expands this analysis to argue that proverbs are ideological tools that support and normalize unequal gender relations in natural language, writes Lomotey and Chachu

(2020). In the same way, using critical discourse analysis of a selection of proverbs from three different cultures, Fatima et al. (2025) argue that, every time, the discourse in proverbs has a significant effect on social cognition and reinforces gender stereotypes.

In the context of South Asia, the use of a gendered discourse goes hand-in-hand with the concept of honor-shame. In the cultures of Pakistan and India, women are clearly assigned the role of family honour carriers, and female conduct is recognised as the key to social respectability, as argued by Mahmood and Ebensgaard Jensen (2024). This gender-profiling of construction forces an undue responsibility on women and judges the actions of men mostly by their male quality of authority and public legitimacy. In a specific way, Ullah (2023) discusses the representation of the female gender in the Pashto proverb, where language reflects the traditional gender system through images of subservient, restricted women.

As to the use of FCDA in proverbial analysis, the authors of this article, Mirza et al. (2024), found that proverb discourse systematically denies women agency and confirms a patriarchal, gender-based social order. Khan (2021) draws attention to ongoing concerns about women perceived as potentially threatening or disruptive when they lack agency in the social world. Similarly, Ombongi's (2024) use of African proverbs shows that female behaviour should be controlled through the culturally sanctioned wisdom that permeates these sayings.

This study aims to reveal the discursive processes of the creation and negotiation of Pashto proverbs as a means to establish femininity and masculinity within the context of patriarchy, which have hitherto been ignored in the study. Clearly, although various studies have discussed representational patterns, they lack a methodological framework to uncover the ideological and power-laden aspects of proverbial discourse in the cultural context of Pashtunwali. This study is intended to fill a gap in previous research. It combines the strengths of latent content analysis with FCDA to look beyond description to critical ideological deconstruction.

### **CONCEPTUAL/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study aims to explore and articulate the discursive construction of gender in Pashto proverbial discourse by drawing on a conceptual framework grounded in three complementary theoretical positions, each of which helps explain this construction. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity is used as the theoretical framework for this conceptual approach. Butler challenges the neat boundary between gender and biological sexiness and insists that it is a "discursive performance" as it is "defined by repetition." Gender norms are not inherent, but constantly referred to, repeated and constructed as such. As part of this system, the proverb is a performative speech: the images of women and men associated with modesty, silence, and honor, and those associated with authority, bravery, and leadership, respectively, are not only pictures of gender but also its production and regulation. These chains of ideas link over time and space, making the content feel toward them as cultural truth transparent and keeping their function as construction largely hidden. Butler's work focuses on repetition, while Erving Goffman's work on self-presentation and social performance (1959) directs attention to the interactional contexts in which this type of discourse circulates. Interactions occur in social situations in which an actor must enact socially accepted identities. Social situations require social actors to enact socially conferred identities.

In the social life of the Pashtuns, proverbs are acts of scripted culture: instructions to women on what they should say, do and be; and to men on what they are expected to say, do and be in the context of the family and community. Such scripts serve as unsanctioned rules, sanctioning deviance and encouraging gender-conforming performances. Goffman's theory thus uncovers proverbs not only as cultural products but also as resources for structuring interaction in daily life, in line with FCDA's focus on regulating social interaction through discourse. Both these frameworks do not function in isolation; they provide an interconnected theoretical framework that reflects on analytical categories

and the interpretative logic of the study. However, a conceptual framework aligns with the FCDA methodology, providing both theory and method within a comprehensive analytical approach.

FCDA is highly relevant to developing an understanding of the intersection of power and gender in discourse, with both Butler and Lazar (2006) focusing on discourse as the site where power and gender dynamics intersect. Therefore, by combining the strengths of conceptual, theoretical and analytical frameworks, they are useful for analyzing proverbial discourse because they direct analytical attention in different directions.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis conducted in this paper is inspired by Michelle Lazar (2006). FCDA discusses the discursive reproduction of relations of power between the sexes, suggesting that patriarchal ideologies are made to appear legitimate and natural. FCDA, in contrast to descriptive linguistic analysis, puts the political aspects of discourse in the spotlight, specifically as social practices in which asymmetrical gender relations are generated, maintained, challenged, or ignored. Within the field of the language-gender-power nexus, FCDA's focus is on the critical analysis of language's importance, particularly in ways that normalize inequality and make patriarchy seem universal and self-evident to everyone. This study not only provides a theoretical foundation for understanding proverbs as ideological texts, but also develops an analytical framework for systematically analyzing the strategies used in Pashto proverbial discourse to build and institutionalize gendered power hierarchies through metaphorical representation, binary opposition, evaluative language, symbolic association and moral positioning. This conceptual frame is therefore an actualization of the FCDA methodology presented in the next section.

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology of this study is grounded in a qualitative approach and is two-fold. Firstly, latent content analysis is conducted to select and initially code the proverbial corpus; secondly, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) is the primary analytical method used to analyze the corpus with an ideology-deconstruction purpose. The methodologically oriented, principled integration is to move beyond the surface description of this study and to probe the construction and legitimization of gender through proverbial discourse.

Using purposive sampling, the corpus was built by selecting 25 proverbs from published Pashtun proverb collections, cultural databases, and by asking native Pashtun speakers. For a proverb to be included in the collection, it had to meet the criterion of theoretical saturation, which required sufficient therapeutic content and analytic coherence to address the research questions while also being thematically varied. Cultural validity was confirmed with local people who had mastery of the linguistic and cultural aspects of Pashtun proverbs. All the proverbs were translated into English to highlight their contextual and conceptual aspects in an idiomatic rather than literal way, prioritizing ideology over grammar.

**Table 1: Selected Pashto Proverbs Corpus**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Pashto Proverb (Romanized)</b>	<b>English Translation</b>
1	Da kor izzat pa khaza ke de	The honour of the house lies in the woman
2	Khaza da kor nang de	A woman is the honour of the home
3	Da khaze satra da nari ghairat de	A woman's modesty is a man's honour
4	Khaza che na lidi, izzat lari	A woman who is not seen, has honour
5	Da khaze pa khanda kor sharmige	Because of a woman's mistake, the whole house is shamed
6	Khaza pa yaw qadam sharm rawali	A woman can bring shame with a single step

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7	Soor khaza, kaley dushman	A talkative woman is the enemy of the village
8	Da jaargi khaza, da kor aafat de	A quarrelsome woman is a calamity for the home
9	Che khaza ziyaat khabare kri, kor kharab l	A woman who talks too much ruins the home
10	aza pa khulay na kri, che bey da mandan r	A woman should not go out without a male escort
11	Nar da kor sar de	A man is the head of the house
12	Nar che na wee, kor be sar na wee	Without a man, a house has no head
13	Nar da meydaan saray de	A man is the person of the battlefield/public arena
14	Da nar qawat da kor buniyaad de	A man's strength is the foundation of the home
15	Da nari ghairat de nari pe laar ke de	A man's honour lies in the path of bravery
16	Nar da meelmastya speena khema de	A man is the white tent of hospitality
17	Che naray zhagh awi, khaza naray kor awere	where there is a strong male voice, there is a strong house
18	Nar che leewanay wi, kor yi abad wi	Even a mad man holds the household together
19	Da nar kaar da baandey kaar de	A man's work is the work of the outside world
20	Khaza pa koor ki de, nar pa maidan ki da	A woman belongs in the home; a man belongs in the field
21	Da kor nang pa khulay ke de	The honour of the home is locked behind the door
22	Nari wina tora we, khaze wina spin we	man's blood is dark (honoured); a woman's blood is white (vulnerable)
23	Khaza pa khpal zrire pori da biyan khabere	A woman speaks only to her own heart
24	Nar da qam paas de, khaza da koor paas c	man is the guardian of the tribe; a woman is the guardian of the home
25	Khaza de laka obah we, nar de laka nar w	woman should be like water (yielding); a man should be like a man (firm)

Twenty-five proverbs were chosen and grouped into 3 themes. One and a half months were dedicated to selecting each proverb, which was associated with a specific aspect of the gender-construction part of the Pashtunwali framework, thereby assuring both thematic and analytical diversity across the corpus.

The analysis was carried out in two steps, as described in Table 2. Transitions between the stages involve a conceptual shift, from formulating implicit patterns in the analysis stage (latent content analysis) to critically amending the discursive devices that reinforce patriarchy (FCDA).

**Table 2: Overview of the Two-Stage Analytical Framework**

Stage	Method	Process and Analytical Focus
Stage 1	Latent Content Analysis	Proverbs read iteratively to identify implicit language patterns, symbols, and recurring gendered references. Open coding was

		applied to generate analytical codes (e.g., female modesty, male authority, familial shame, social legitimacy). Codes consolidated into four thematic clusters: (1) Femininity and Honour/Shame; (2) Femininity and Moral Surveillance; (3) Masculinity and Authority/Legitimacy; (4) Proverbial Discourse as Patriarchal Social Control.
Stage 2	Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)	FCDA (Lazar, 2006) applied to each thematic cluster to examine five discursive strategies: (a) binary opposition; (b) metaphorical representation; (c) evaluative language; (d) symbolic association; (e) moral positioning. Analysis informed by Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory and Goffman's (1959) social performance framework. Researchers' reflexivity is maintained as a methodological tool throughout.

The present study employed latent content analysis to unpack the hidden layer of discourse construction, focusing on what is implied, presupposed, and symbolically deposited rather than on explicit statements (Sarwar & Arslan, 2024). This methodological tactic aligns with proverbs, whose ideological strength lies not in assertion but in metaphor, cultural resonance and symbolic imagery.

The Analyses took place in three phases. Firstly, the selected proverbs were read repeatedly so that language patterns, symbols, and the use of specific words with women and men, honour and shame, authority and constraint could be identified. Second, the Open Coding technique was used to identify and categorise the resurfacing implicit meanings into Analytical Codes: female modesty, female honour, female shame, female silence and obedience, male authority, male bravery, masculine leadership, social legitimacy and family reputation. Third, these codes were organized into four thematic clusters: (1) Femininity and Honour/Shame, (2) Femininity and Moral Surveillance, (3) Masculinity and Authority/Legitimacy and (4) Proverbial Discourse as Patriarchal Social Control.

As developed by Lazar (2006), FCDA examines the naturalization and legitimation of unequal gender relations through specific discursive strategies. When applied to the categories that emerged from Stage 1, FCDA identifies five discursive strategies that transmedially glossed over the thematic clusters found in the proverbial corpus: (a) binary opposition that sets up feminine and masculine subject positions as opposed to each other and ranked accordingly; (b) metaphorical representation in which the female body and actions are metaphorically coded at a place of honour or a place of shame; (c) evaluative language in which lexemes carry implicit moral judgments; (d) symbolic association in which abstract gendered values are assigned to specific social actors; (e) moral positioning in which the roles of feminine and masculine subject positions are prescribed and other ways of performing these roles are condemned.

Further, the close relationship of the first author to the problem of reflexive positionality as a Pashtun woman to whom these proverbs have an everyday cultural resonance influences and informs the FCDA analysis. This internal reflexivity is used as a method, not as a bias; instead, it enhances the interpretation and is rooted in culturally set experience. All interpretations are expressed abstractly and linked to previous research for analytical clarity and transparency.

### **DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF PASHTO PROVERBS**

The analysis is available around the three thematic clusters that emerged from the latent content analysis. For each cluster, the respective proverbs are presented, then the new proverbs are discussed, and finally, an FCDA analysis of discursive strategies used in the selected new proverbs is made. Each analytical subsection clearly ties in with the research questions to illustrate how proverbs discursively

create femininity, masculinity, apply ideological mechanisms and serve as tools for patriarchal social control.

**1. Femininity as the Custodian of Familial Honor**

The following proverbs cluster around the discursive construction of femininity as the primary site of familial honour:

*Da kor izzat pa khaza ke de* (The honour of the house lies in the woman)

*Da khaze satra da nari ghairat de* (A woman's modesty is a man's honour)

*Khaza che na lidi, izzat lari* (A woman who is not seen, has honour)

The idea that honour belongs with the woman, that she must guard it, enjoy it and lose it, is seen throughout these three proverbs. The first proverb puts the honour of all the household in the woman as its substrate. In contrast, the second reads that the modesty (satra) of the woman is the direct representation of a man's honour (ghairat), so femininity becomes the expression through which a man's social status is assessed as a direct consequence of it; the third reads that even the act of being unseen is a form of honour for a woman. Overall, these proverbs don't just narrate roles in society but create a "feminine subject" in whose first task is to maintain the collective establishment's reputation by the management of one's body, modesty, and avoidance of public view.

The symbolic association that dominates this matrix of proverbs is between femininity (khaza) and honour (izzat/nang/satra), a bond consistently represented in these proverbs and not a social construct but a cultural self-evidence. This symbolic chain gives women the status of permanent debt-servitude, a moral value determined purely in terms of relations: as a subject of the honour they bring to their families and to male protectors. Lazar (2006) argues that such associations represent discursive naturalisation – things that are socially constructed are made to look like cultural truths that are timeless.

The third proverb opens the door to moral positioning as a mode of discourse and calls for the ideal feminine state of being unnoticeable and hidden away in the home. It's made up of social virtue and is not meant as a limitation, rather as a workaround for the effectiveness of a discourse of proverbs, whereby watchfulness is replaced by self-regulation. Women are trained to read the community's gaze and regulate themselves accordingly, as we can see in Foucault's (1977) model. It is reinforced by Mahmood and Ebensgaard Jensen (2024), who show that in the honour-discourse world of South Asia, women's behaviour consistently serves as an indicator of a family's respectability. The linkage between femininity and honour is not peculiar to Pashtun culture but is common across South Asia and transnationally. They also show that honour is systematically gendered in a comparative lexical-semantic analysis of Language of the Subcontinent, such as Abubakar and Ehsani (2025) have done; female honour exists as fragile, relationship-based, dependent on males, and male honour as stable, 'self. It is linguistically marked by proverbs like "Da khaze satra da nari ghairat de", meaning A woman's modesty is a man's honour", where masculine honour is largely contingent upon the policing and surveillance of their bodies and behaviours. In their comparative study of Kazakh and English proverbs, Abdimaulen et al. (2022) conclude that the "man" "woman" conceptual pair is characterised by the fact that woman is always defined as a relation to man and family/carers, and this aspect is reflected almost verbatim in the present Pashto corpus. Such insights corroborate the opinion that the discursive production of femininity-as-honour is not just a manifestation of the culture manifest on the surface but rather is an ideology located at the heart of the culture, that is, it is a systematic structure of ideology, a thinking or discourse, which can be found beyond the linguistic and geographical boundaries and act through common ideologies of the control, visibility and respectability, which are typical for patriarchy (Domeris, 2018).

**Shame, Surveillance, and the Regulation of Female Identity**

Another cluster of themes creates femininity through the fear of shame and social disruption. This is the regulatory aspect that is portrayed by the following proverbs:

*Da khaze pa khanda kor sharmige* (Because of a woman's mistake, the whole house is shamed)

*Soor khaza, kaley dushman* (A talkative woman is the enemy of the village)

*Da jaargi khaza, da kor aafat de* (A quarrelsome woman is a calamity for the home)

The correct logic of these proverbs is to try to capture in advance whatever has been deemed wrong, without actually naming it, but with the implicit assumption that it is a wrongdoing. They do not name individual wrongdoings, but the fact of unsanctioned female behaviour is, in itself, wrongdoing. The first teaching proposed involves the deserved condemnation of one woman and the many in her family. The latter takes up the theme of the former, creating vocal womanhood as a social risk. The third accentuates this construction by describing the assertive or disagreeing woman as a "calamity" (aafat), which is normally used to refer to natural disasters. The general spirit of these proverbs hints at female silence, compliance and emotional restraint, which together make up a social duty rather than a personal decision.

Across this cluster, the discursive strategy is one of opposition, beginning with the woman who is contained, silent and compliant—that is, honourable—to the woman who is a shaper of shame and one who brings inflictions to the community through being vocal, assertive or independent. This binary sets up a moral hierarchy in which women's autonomy is a red line, seeing that it is inherently threatening and needs to be suppressed in advance. A central tool of FCDA, as cited by Lazar (2006), is that of binary opposition, which establishes mutually exclusive and hierarchically arranged positions for subjects that "normalize subordination.

The second and third proverbs function in somewhat of a constructed manner with evaluative language. The extreme negative evaluation of both voicing women as the "enemy of the village" (kaley dushman) and quarrelsome women as a "calamity" (aafat) serves to discipline female expression. These lexical choices implicitly moralise women's assertion as a 'communal threat'. The tendency for such moral judgment to be asymmetrical (Lomotey and Chachu 2020), meaning that the actions of women are condemned while those of men are allowed, is characteristic of patriarchy as postulated in proverbs.

According to Butler (1990), these proverbs are disciplinary citations – such that, when repeatedly and endlessly restate the catastrophic social ramifications of female voice and agency, they force women into self-regulatory performances of silence and compliance. A similar perspective on the disciplinary dimension is presented by Ullah (2023) in the Pashto context, where the risks to women's freedom of movement and expression stem from their potential to bring dishonor to their family, community, or audience.

Shame and surveillance are well-documented in comparative texts across cultures, and particularly in those specifically about the control of women's bodies. These notions are well documented across diverse cultural contexts and especially in those examining the control of women's bodies. El-Nashar et al. (2024) conducted a thematic analysis of Egyptian proverbs. They found a common theme that presents women as a potential threat to social stability due to their speech, movement and sexuality and that they need to be kept under observation by the community. These are striking parallels with this Pashto corpus. In both traditions, female voice and independent activity signal to the community what is considered dangerous to the social integrity, and the proverbs themselves preemptively establish discursive 'rules'. In the case of proverbs from East Gojam, Wubie et al. (2022) expand this analysis by arguing that proverbial discourse is an "ideological weapon" used to marginalize women into secondary social roles by internalizing a patriarchal imperative within the cultural authority of wisdom. Primarily, this regulatory process is not confined to restricting "what is allowed," since much of the socially negative feeling is internalized; people modify what they do to avoid being socially blamed, as Goffman (1959) pointed out. The search pattern of these proverbs is strikingly similar: they are not likely to be enforced directly, but rather set up a self-regulating mechanism in women who are taught to experience the social consequences of violating what is

allowed them to do. Similarly, Otieno (2023) states that discourse works as discursive templates that predefine female identity as what a woman can't be or do, and that Pashto proverbs in this cluster reinforce this Male construction as a logic.

### **Masculinity, Authority, and Social Legitimacy**

A third cluster of proverbs constructs masculinity as the natural seat of authority, public agency, and structural necessity. The following proverbs exemplify this thematic dimension:

*Nar da kor sar de* (A man is the head of the house)

*Nar da meydaan saray de* (A man is the person of the battlefield/public arena)

*Da nar qawat da kor buniyaad de* (A man's strength is the foundation of the home)

These three proverbs build masculinity in three mother-of-all-forms of register ideologically, but interwoven. The first makes the man the 'head' (sar) of the family, with cognitive authority and gives him direction, making his authority organic and structurally necessary. The second takes masculine legitimacy out of the private sphere and into the public domain, linking masculinity to social engagement and collective defense. The third is that man is a material metaphor "foundation" (buniyaad), implying that the whole structure of society and the domestic sphere is built on him. It is important to note that there were no parallel proverbs on female leadership, authority, or decision-making power to emphasize, ideologically, the asymmetry of this corpus.

The prevailing mode of discourse is the metaphorical, achieved through corporeal and architectural metaphors. This metaphorical shift of sar (head) to buniyaad (foundation) in the male manifests male authority in language and body structure; without a head, the body can't work, and without a foundation, a building can't stand. In such an "invisibilized" social hierarchy, as Lazar (2006) points out, power is expressed and becomes a self-evident order of things.

The second proverb begins the symbolic connection of the idea of 'masculine' and the space of 'public action'/'public battle' the maidan. In this way, this association discursively excludes women from the public domain by rendering their absence "expected" and therefore "natural." The binary opposition is implied: men exist on the maidan, while women exist in the domestic interior; men are the foundations, women are the occupants of the building; the former have no involvement in conceptualizing the building, the latter conceptualize the house without them. It is one of the most defining aspects of the proverbial discourse of patriarchy, in which the masculine is positioned as the unmarked, positive discourse of existence, and the feminine is the subjugated conceptual relatedness (Lomotey and Chachu, 2020). It also aligns with Sarwar and Arslan's (2024) observation, which highlights that the portrayal of the use of the Pashtun language always aimed toward the customary masculinity of leadership as a frame of reference that defines the prevailing social equilibrium in the community, thereby impacting their perception of the gender roles in domestic and civic life.

This embodied construction of masculinity as natural authority in this corpus is echoed in results from comparative proverbial studies undertaken in much different cultural landscapes, further supporting the cross-culturally ideology-stretching of patriarchal discourse. In the study of Kazakh and English proverbs, Abdimaulen et al. (2022) illustrate that the representation of "man" in the proverb belongs to the sphere of action, decision-making and social agency, and the representation of "woman" belongs to the sphere of passive, as home and to the concept of relational subordination. This structural parallelism with Pashto proverbs reinforces Lazar's (2006) position that the more 'natural' and cross-cultural an ideology is in various contexts, the more likely it is to succeed in covertly veiling its constructed, politically laden nature.

Moreover, Altohami (2023) reported that the masculine gender was mostly portrayed as permanent (wad/idam), structured (zahz/dhaha), and socially indispensable (alfaat/fat), which is also captured by the Arabic and American English metaphors (sar/head and buniyaad/foundation) found in this Pashto corpus. In this instance, the concept of symbolic power in Bourdieu (1991) is telling: the male authority that is inscribed as need, whether in the body or in the architecture, is socially

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misrecognized or presented as natural rather than contingent and historically produced as a power structure. Nowhere is this logic more so than in the proverb, 'Nar che na wee, kor be sar na wee' (Without a man, a house has no head), which spoke not on the grounds of power but of structural fact and which rendered questioning and criticism of authority impossible by swamping them with the illusion of 'need'.

## Discussion

From the three thematic clusters examined each highlighting a particular aspect of women's role in relation to their health, education, and religious observance it can be discerned in both existing and emerging literature around proverbial discourse that it does not simply encapsulate certain social values, but rather generates and influences social behaviour, specifically, by changing gendered social norms into moral mandates. Rather than being given explicit authorization, this regulatory aspect emerges through the discursive authority of what is regarded as 'wisdom': 'wisdom' as a construction of power, as Bourdieu (1991) states, is most effective when it is hidden. The cross-cutting logic identified by the latent content analysis is the fourth thematic cluster: proverbation as a tool of patriarchy: social control.

### *FCDA: Discursive Strategies and Ideological Function*

Themes	Discursive Construction	Research Questions	Theoretical Insights
Femininity as the Custodian of Familial Honor	Cultural construction of femininity with honor	RQ1, RQ3	Foucault's concept of power (Foucault, 1977); Butler's performativity (Butler, 1990); FCDA (Lazar, 2006)
Shame, Surveillance, and the Regulation of Female Identity	Moral code of conduct through language	RQ2	Goffman's stigma theory (Goffman, 1963); Butler's performativity (Butler, 1990); evaluative language and gender ideology (Lomotey & Chachu, 2020)
Masculinity, Authority, and Social Legitimacy	Male power as self-evident social order	RQ3	Bourdieu's symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991); Butler's performativity (Butler, 1990); FCDA (Lazar, 2006)

All five of the identified discursive strategies within the corpus binary opposition, metaphorical representation, evaluative language, symbolic association and moral positioning are interconnected and work as an entire system in the production of an ideology of patriarchal power relations with the solemnity of tradition. The social world is organised by binary oppositions regarding permissible and impermissible gendered behaviours the symbolic connection of femininity with constraint and the entitlement with masculinity. Evaluative language incorporates moral terminology into seemingly ordinary language. Metaphor adds the false veneer of natural, descriptive truth to an ideology. Moral positioning normatively prescribes certain kinds of gender performance, and it indexes deviation as a "cultural transgression.

What makes this system so strong is that it can present itself as common sense, rather than ideology. Proverbs in Pashtun culture are not just statements made socially; they are understood as truths of the culture and of generations. The best hegemonic discourse is when the workings are not visible, as argued by Lazar (2006). It is confirmed by Fatima et al., who show that gendered norms

circulate as semi-truths in proverbial discourse, creating, over time, 'interpretive schemas' in individuals' minds that they use to understand their own and others' behaviour.

This “re-regulatory” structure is magnified by the honour-shame system underpinning the Pashtunwali. Honour codes are socially negotiated and behaviourally prescriptive (Okyerere and Effah Darko, 2019). Thus, we can see that the proverb, which associates women's conduct with honour and shame, taps into the most potent tool in social regulation in the cultural life of the Pashtun community. In an honour-based community, violating the cultural wisdom contained in a proverb can place one's own and one's family's honour at risk, resulting in serious social consequences. Mahmood and Ebensgaard Jensen (2024) refer to this as the logic of collective accountability, as the gendered language of honour-discourse disciplines the individual through the risk of collective social consequences.

The analysis suggests that the discursive strategies found in the corpus constitute an entangled, mutually reinforcing system of ideas; they level patriarchy's gender order as a cultural fact, create an economy of honour and shame, and produce gendered subjectivities through an idealized, repetitive circulation of performative scripts. The power that comes about is a power one cannot see as power, the proverbial power, the symbolic power Bourdieu (1991) speaks of.

The findings of this research align with a large body of recent cross-cultural scholarship and thus lend support to the analysis and theoretical underpinnings. In their study on CG study of Phrasematics of English and Uzbek Text, Sugdiyona and Saporbayevich (2026) argued in a cognitive-linguocultural approach that the concept of “honour” and “shame” is differently phrased on men and women because of the systematic pattern of linguistic features: the concept of honour is phrased with emphasis on manly agency, public recognition, and acts of social action; while the concept of “shame” is phrased with emphasis on womanly moral quality, silence, and domesticity. The findings of this cognitive asymmetry align with the structured and discursive nature of the Pashtuns' corpus examined here, validating the claim that the proverbial discourse serves to structure and organize gendered experiences, not as an arbitrary expression of the author's creativity but as a reproduction of culturally patterned conceptual schema.

In his analysis of honour and shame in proverbial wisdom traditions, Domeris (2018) argues that proverbial wisdom is a gendered map of the social landscape that celebrates feminine wisdom only when it aligns with male-dominant ideals of modesty and reticence. The findings of this paper directly address research questions and follow the cross-cultural comparisons, corroborating that Pashto proverbs are not simply "representatives" of power relations, but rather are actively involved in the “social reproduction of gendered power norms” which is “most powerful when it operates in the form of state-sanctioned, traditionalised folk wisdom” (Bourdieu, 2002: 268). Also, the honour-shame system of Pashtunwali further enhances this regulatory power, as in the language and culture of South Asia, there is a semantic field of words that is more socially relevant, and the implications of its violation are intergenerational and collective (Abubakar and Ehsani, 2025). In such a system, the proverb is no longer just an advice-giving unit, but rather a discursive means of social governance, whose ideological impact is that of being said in a prophetic form.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this study clearly and explicitly reflect upon the integrated methodology used, latent content analysis and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, which have demonstrated Pashtunwali-based proverbs as potent discursive resources that build, naturalise and reproduce the notions of feminine and masculine in the Pashtunwali context. Beyond descriptive cultural analysis, the study identifies the discursive approaches used to create proverbial discourse ideologies that centre on gender and justify disparities: the binary opposition approach, the symbolic association approach, the metaphorical representation of gender, the evaluating language approach and the moral positioning approach.

The results show that femininity is codified as the epicenter of family honor and a territory of moral responsibility, with masculinity understood as naturalized authority and social validity. These are not simply cultural expressions; they are devices of the discursive regulation of society, related to the honor-shame regulatory system, and intended to discipline and enforce gender conformity. The focus on the role of latent content analysis to create the 'themes' of the ideology and on the specification of how the FCDA works from thematic analysis to critical ideological deconstruction validates the method as a methodological contribution to feminist discourse research dealing with culturally embedded genres.

Through all this, the study has once again demonstrated that there is no neutral discourse and that vernacular discourse (proverbs) is not beyond the domain of power. It is, therefore, important to have reference to a certain analysis on the ways the discourse that constitutes the proverb(s) builds and maintains patriarchy's idea of gender relations, which is important to enable the critical discourse(s) that are essential for discussing gender and social change among Pashtuns and any other people whose identity is culture-discoursed.

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This research would serve as the basis for many more studies. First, the analytical approach elaborated in this article can be extended to other types of Pashtun oral and written cultural productions, such as folk poetry (landay), folktales and social media writings, to [better](#) understand [better](#) how gender-given ideology is conveyed and possibly contested across various discourse environments. Second, comparative research on proverbial discourse in other South Asian languages & cultures would allow a more complete mapping of the connections between language and a patriarchal, honorable system in the region. Third, future work could explore how traditional proverbial wisdom becomes part of young Pashtun men's and women's lives in the social and digital worlds today, which synchronic analysis of the present study can only partially capture, as it might reveal the dynamic and contested nature of traditional proverbial wisdom's discourse in contemporary life. Lastly, there is significant potential for participatory research in collaboration with the Pashtun people to create critical literacy-based applications for proverbial discourse whilst raising awareness of the role of domestic speech in evoking social expectations and identities.

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