

# Reclaiming the Progressive Image of Pakistani Women: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Web Blog “Humans of New York”

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## Abstract

The portrayal of Muslim women in Western media has often been biased and stereotypical, leading to negative and generalized views. In the case of Pakistani Muslim women, it is crucial to encourage indigenous voices and movements to represent a more nuanced perspective. Critical Discourse Analysis is a useful tool to examine the linguistic categories used in media representation. In this study, Stanton's 'Humans of New York' blog was analyzed through Van Leeuwen's model to explore the image of Pakistani women constructed by the text. The analysis revealed that the blog portrays Pakistani women as progressive, educated, and independent, breaking the patriarchal shackles through education and awareness. This representation offers a broader perspective that is usually lacking in mainstream media, and hence contributes to improving the image of Pakistani women. It is essential to critically examine how social actors are represented, categorized, nominated, and assigned unique identities or functions in any discourse to construct their identity. By doing so, we can better understand the ways in which media representation can impact societal attitudes and work towards a more accurate and nuanced portrayal of diverse communities.

**Keywords:** Social media; Pakistan; Muslim women; language; critical discourse analysis

## Introduction

Social media provides the freedom to common people in representing and spreading their point of views regarding various social, political, religious and economic issues. This evolving medium is a breakaway from mainstream print and

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electronic media where hegemonic control over discourse is dominant, thereby resulting in presentation of very restricted point of views. It cannot be denied that the narratives developed and presented by media have strong influence on the thoughts and actions of people (Perse and Lambe 2017). Therefore, traditional media which is fraught with biased and stereotypical representations (Kroon et al. 2019), results in construction of ideological mind-script of people which is subsequently prejudiced and subject to partisan bias. The issue of pervasiveness of fake news in mainstream media is also well acknowledged and has initiated public discussion, particularly among elites, whose opinions are in turn influencing the public's perception and evaluation of conventional news media (Van Duyn and Collier 2019). Because of these bitter realities, the emergence of social media challenges the ultimate authority of mainstream print and electronic media as unbiased information providers.

The change in how people access information, nowadays, i.e. through shared content on social media, makes the assumption void that all are being exposed to a common set of images. Rather, proliferation of channels on social media offers exposure to multiple facets of a stance, thus making it easier to avoid dissonant information and sift through radicalized content (Perse and Lambe 2017). According to Park, Lee and Han (2007, p.126), "online information is higher in credibility than information from other more traditional media because the posted information is by experienced people" (for example traveler sites, chefs and other professionals) who are "considered as credible sources of information" (Gretzel, Yoo and Purifory 2007). In the same vein, social media provides various platforms via which third world women, particularly Muslim women, who are widely misrepresented and spoken over in western media, can voice their opinions and highlight their achievements.

The western imagery of Muslim women in mainstream media, often critiqued by Mohanty (1988) as a representation of a singular monolithic subject, can now be contrasted with the diverse and self-constructed images they present on social media, challenging the homogenized portrayal of "third world women." This paper thus ventures into exploring the image of Pakistani women which emerges from accounts narrated by various females on the web blog 'Humans of New York'. A linguistic feminist analysis is undertaken to uncover the resultant image that gets constructed and how that is different than their projection in mainstream print and electronic media.

An important contribution of social media is that it has helped reshape feminism. The social media has allowed the transition to the fourth wave of feminism which is characterized by division between two ideological camps, one advocating individual empowerment and the other collective liberation aided by calls for solidarity and community building (Donegan 2018). The collective face of feminism which is being advocated by the latter camp has gained momentum due to popular social media movements like #MeToo, Time's Up, Everyday Sexism and Middle-Eastern Al-Hawaider campaign (Haughton 2019).

Online platforms have completely changed the landscape of 'collective action' in terms of its scales, scopes and dynamics (Agarwal, Lim and Wigand 2012) as it allows for an individual cause to diffuse within the network, shape into a collective cause and then transform into collective action or full-fledged movements (Agarwal, Lim and Wigand 2011). The accessibility, speed and connectivity of social media means transnational communities can be created and mobilized quickly to deliver a fast and impactful action related to women-centric issues.

When discussing feminism in developing countries, much of the discursive construction of women has been shaped by Western feminist categories. This approach often overlooks local contexts and complexities, highlighting a form of Western hypocrisy that imposes a monolithic view on diverse experiences in third-world countries (Mohanty, 1988). Through the lens of Western feminism, they are projected as a homogeneous, disempowered group much like the construction of religious women who are also looked upon as a uniform block of oppressed individuals who cannot see the inherent patriarchy in religion. The marginalization of Muslim women is even more magnified given the widely-prevalent construction of women in third world countries where Muslim women predominately reside. Muslim women continue to be looked upon as entities that need to be "saved" or "corrected" by Western liberalism (Kasana, 2014).

Given this backdrop, there is a growing need to encourage regional voices and movements to present a counter narrative and portray a more balanced and nuanced view of Muslim women (Pennington 2018). In recent years many Pakistani women have initiated popular feminist web blogs such as Girls at Dhabas, Aurat March and Feminustani to raise awareness of the issues that women in the country face and what feminism can do for them.

This paper analyzes one such web blogs, 'Humans of New York (HONY)' which aims at representing places and people as they are, without cultural stereotyping. The webpage was started in 2010 by photographer Bran Stanton, with the idea of featuring photos of indigenous people alongside a glimpse of their lives in a form of short accompanying narrations, quotes or anecdotes. The web blog is unique because it is initiated by an outsider/westerner with the intent of providing an unequivocal platform for indigenous people to voice their personalized views and narratives. Since the narrative is a first-hand account by natives, it is caught but not told through the perspective of a Westerner.

The popularity of the blog is evident as Stanton expanded his project globally, offering diverse and nuanced perspectives that contrast with mainstream media's depiction of Muslim women in third-world countries. There are more than twenty million subscribers of the web blog today where interesting, inspiring and heartwarming collection of stories and photographs of various countries are shared on daily basis (Stanton, 2020).

The web blog, "Humans of New York", featured Pakistan as one of its destination countries in 2015. Amongst others, it featured many women-centric stories which gained particular interest in a country where women are traditionally presumed to take very submissive roles. While representations of Muslims and Islam in traditional media has been relatively well studied but there are significantly less studies that focus on these processes within social media (Törnberg and Törnberg 2016). This paper fills in that gap and makes use of critical discourse analysis to analyze what type of image of Pakistani women is constructed through language in these narrations.

The Van Leeuwen's (1996) model has been used to classify words or phrases into different linguistic categories to see the resultant representation of Pakistani women in this web blog. The six linguistic categories were used, each reflect a different dimension of Pakistani women which then helps us construct an overall image of them. The results reveal that an active, resilient and a hard-working image of Pakistani women emerges, who is actively contributing in the social activism and other development activities in the country. This representation of Pakistani women breaks the subservient myth regarding the status of women in this part of the region. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the literature review which is centered on the way Muslim women are depicted in western media

and literature. Section 3 outlines the methodology which is derived from Van Leeuwen's (1996) model of critical discourse whereby narrations are evaluated on the bases of six defined parameters. Section 4 presents and analyzes the results. A discussion of the results is presented in Section 5 and finally conclusions are drawn in Section 6, reflecting how the depiction of Pakistani women has been done differently in this novel project.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **❖ Gender stereotypes**

Western commentators have generally projected a negative image of Muslim women where they are represented as living in patriarchal societies and suffering under the shackles of cultural and religious rules and regulations which are oppressive (Abdellatif and Ottoway, 2007). The image of Muslim women is mostly tainted with racism and ethnocentrism. Said (2001) argues that Orientalism is an “exclusively male province” (p.207), where oriental women are viewed with sexist blinders and conceived as “the creatures of male power fantasy” (p.207). Similarly, Spivak, (1994) critiques the tendency within western media and academia to essentialize Asian women, reducing them to passive and voiceless objects. The representation of women in media particularly in the context of third world Eastern women, is a complex and multifaceted issue that intersects with questions of gender, ethnicity, religion, and national identity. This style of coverage still exists today where mass media continues to project them as being docile, backward and oppressed (Macdonald, 2003). As a result, westerners continue to visualize Muslim culture without much actual interaction with them (Rankin, 2013). The identification of Muslim women problems as a religious problem is very prominent in the western media (Rahman, 2012, p.106).

Recent researches reveal that Muslim female activists have shown rejection and even contempt for the concept of Western feminism as it advocates excessive individualism and even licentiousness (Abdellatif and Ottoway, 2007), both being against Islamic norms. The dress code of Muslim women which outlines certain precepts for covering the female body is taken as the main point of contention between western feminist and Muslim women as it is viewed by the west as a blatant sign of oppression of female's self-expression. Petley and Richardson (2011) observed many intriguing ways in which media coverage of veiled Muslim women is posed as a threat and a deliberate rejection of the ‘British way of life’. Abu-Lughod, (2013)

critiques the mindset that has justified foreign interference and military invasions under the guise of rescuing women from Islam. According to Macdonald (2006), there has been a long discursive obsession amongst western colonist and imperialist to “unveil” alien culture and practices and bring them in conformity with ideological norms of the dominating power.

#### ❖ **Gender construction of Pakistani women**

Pakistan is a predominately Muslim country. It is a patriarchal society which has traditional gender differences, gender expectations and gender roles in all walks of life. According to Saigol (2005) gender discrimination and stereotyping is so deep-rooted in Pakistan that it is also evident and reinforced in school textbooks and curriculum where boys are seen in major roles and leading professions whereas females are relegated to home settings and supporting roles. However, the role of Pakistani women is changing as they are emerging as a critical force in the journey of development of the country (Shroff 2020). Despite the various odds and threats, they are trying to carve out their national identity and achieve prominence. However, such images of Pakistani women are mostly ignored and incidents of violence and subjugation are highlighted, specifically when it comes to foreign media.

In this regard, Charania (2015) gives one example of ‘Malala Yousafzai’, which is taken as the ultimate symbol of Pakistan’s failure towards protecting women rights, consequently erasing all the multi-dimensional feminist works going on in various cultural and political spheres of the country. According to Charania (2015), Malala’s shooting incident indicates how individual actions are exaggerated and generalized to serve the white supremacist propaganda of projecting all such acts of violence as ‘Muslim terrorism’. A discourse analysis of US print media reveals how media discourse modifies Malala Yousafzai’s own narrative by largely omitting any reference to religion in her decision to take up activism and her public criticism of Taliban’s interpretation of Islam (Khurshid and Gurrero 2016; Khurshid and Pitts 2017). In fact, very systematically, in a particular historical and socio-political context, images of Pakistani Muslim women are typically framed as a threat to the American lifestyle and therefore need to be corrected (Rahman, 2014).

❖ **Reclaiming their identity**

To reclaim their identity and counter the mainstream western narrative, Muslim women have started to assert themselves by using social media. It also provides a poignant depiction of Muslim women's real experiences, emphasizing the complexities and challenges they face in their daily lives. Piela (2013) in her visual rhetoric study of self-representation of naqabis (Muslim women who choose to cover their faces in public) on popular photo sharing websites, reveals that posting of self-portraits has helped break the stereotypical labels of passivity, otherness and violence attached to naqab propagated by the mainstream media. The success of social media in doing so is credited to the participants' establishment of connectivity and intimacy with the audience through their portraits which typically capture them doing mundane daily tasks. In another similar study by Drianville and Saeed (2013), a documentary is analyzed which is entirely shot by all-female Palestinian and Western filmmakers. The documentary moves the viewers' attention away the images of Palestinian women refugee from being “grieving victims” to resilient individuals with dreams, desires and aspirations and carrying on with their lives to best of their abilities under the strict Israeli occupation.

These examples reveal the importance of providing a medium to indigenous people to present their stories rather than being spoken over by others. This paper examines whether the free hand given to the indigenous results in a different representation of Pakistani Muslim women to emerge than what the mainstream western media has portrayed over the years, where mostly the commentator is seen speaking on their behalf.

## **Methodology**

This paper uses critical discourse analysis which is a multi-disciplinary and multi-methodical approach that not only helps to investigate the linguistic intricacies to reveal the underlying ideology, but also provides liberty to the researcher to offer critique in interpreting the data.

❖ **Selection of Sample**

The data for this research has been taken from the webpage of Humans of New York. The relevant data comprises of personal experiences and anecdotes shared by 22 Pakistani women. The theoretical framework is applied on these 22 self-narrated experiences of Pakistani women by clustering the words/phrases under six linguistic

parameters defined by Van Leeuwen (1996). Only 14 out of the total 22 cases are explicitly discussed in this paper because of brevity in instances where more than one case falls in an identified dimension of our theoretical model. Moreover, some of the cases do not fall under any of the six linguistic categories identified, therefore resulting in omission of such cases altogether. Important comments by different readers regarding these narrations have also been taken into account to help understand how Stanton's representation of Pakistani women differs from their projection in mainstream media.

#### ❖ Theoretical Model of Study

Van Leeuwen's model assumes the premise that "all discourses recontextualize social practices" (Van Leeuwen, 2008: p. vii), and recontextualizing principles are related to the basic units of social practice such as actors and their representations and identities. Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 292) claims that critical discourse analysis "has moved towards more explicit dialogue between social theory and practice, richer contextualization, greater interdisciplinarity and greater attention to the multimodality of discourse". The following is a brief description of six major elements in Van Leeuwen's (1996) model, which are taken into account as the criterion for the critical discourse analysis undertaken in the current study.

**Functionalization:** It represents social actors in terms of their activities i.e. what they do, for instance an occupation or role. It can be constructed as a noun formed from a verb by adding suffixes such as -er, -ant, -ent, -ian, -ee (e.g. interviewer, guardian, payee); or as a noun by adding suffixes such as -ist and -eer (e.g. pianist, mountaineer); or as a noun by adding suffixes such as -man, -woman, -person (e.g. crewman, chairperson).

**Classification:** It categorizes social actors according to the way society and institutions differentiate between classes of people. Conventionally, people are classified with respect to their age, gender, provenance, class, wealth, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and so on (Van Leeuwen 2008 p.42).

**Relational identification:** It represents social actors via their personal relationships, kinship or work relations to each other. It is expressed with the help of closed sets of nouns denoting such relationships: 'friend', 'mother', 'wife', etc. Typically, they are possessivized, either using possessive pronouns ('my friend') or

by means of a genitive ('the child's father') or post-modifying phrase with of ('a mother of five') (Van Leeuwen 2008 p.43).

**Physical identification:** Physical identification represents social actors by their physical characteristics which uniquely identify them within a given context. It can be denoted by nouns for describing physical characteristics ('brunette', 'redhead', 'handicapped', etc.), or by adjectives ('short', 'hairy', etc.) or by prepositional phrases with 'with' or 'without' post-modifying highly generalized classifications ('with long hair') (Van Leeuwen 2008 p. 44).

**Nomination:** It is generally recognized by proper nouns, which can be formal (surname only, with or without honorifics), semi-formal (given name and surname), or informal (given name only).

**Instrumentalization:** It references social actors via the instruments they use to fulfill the action they are being represented as being engaged in. Its construction involves substitution of one noun for another.

#### ❖ Data Analysis

Critical discourse analysis reveals categorization of text into the following linguistic categories which is then used to construct an image of Pakistani women.

#### ❖ Nomination

It identifies social actors with a unique identity or names. For this only one example emerges.

“Meet Syeda Ghulam Fatima. Described as a modern-day Harriet Tubman”

Here, Syeda Ghulam Fatima has been referred to as Harriet Tubman who was a prominent African American abolitionist and humanitarian during the American Civil War. This reference to a renowned personality elevates Ghulam Fatima's body of work as head of Bonded Labour Liberation Front and acknowledges her life-long devotion to the cause of ending bonded labor in Pakistan. Without any formal education and working with limited budget, Ghulam Fatima has effectively mobilized communities against the prevalent modern-day slavery in the brick kiln industry of Pakistan. In her struggle against brick kiln owners, Fatima tells stories

of being intimidated, beaten, and even electrocuted for her activism but still stands undeterred and marches on with her efforts.

Noticeable is the nomination of Harriet Tubman used for a Pakistani woman, as it implicitly portrays the fixed image of Pakistani society as being conservative and non-progressive. Tubman was a slave and she not only escaped the slavery but also helped save many enslaved people. Therefore, this nomination is significant and by contextualizing it we could infer that this usage of Harriet Tubman for Syeda Ghulam Fatima depicts Pakistani society as fundamentally conservative where women are enslaved and Syeda Ghulam Fatima has rescued them like Harriet Tubman. It is significant to notice that despite all changing environment in Pakistani society where women are more enlightened, educated and well aware about their rights, instead of celebrating this change, a static picture of the society is still in place.

This story portrays a different side of a Pakistani woman who is strong, resilient and involved in social activism. The misrepresentation of Pakistani women in mainstream media can be gauged by some of the following comments that foreigners posted on this post: (1) "we have seen Pakistani women as we have never seen it before"; (2) "I have to say, in the US it seems like the only pictures we see of Pakistan are a war-torn Pakistan. I'm surprised that everything looks so normal in this picture. Just goes to show the brain washing going on all over the world. Thank You Brandon for showing us the reality of these countries."

The international recognition received by Syeda Ghulam Fatima via this platform has helped raise donations for her organization and has brought her laurels in the form of "Global Citizen Award for Leadership in Civil Society" awarded to her in New York on September, 2015.

#### ❖ Relational identification

In total 23 examples of relational identification are observed in our sample. Some examples of relational identification are as follows.

"I want to have my own career..."

In this narration, the relational identification signifies "belonging together" of a woman's identity with her work and ambition. It shows the growing flexibility

displayed on part of the society, which is now willing to give more freedom of choice to women which was perhaps not possible a few decades ago. My own career also indicates the emergence of a change in women's mindsets due to their resistance to the existing power structures in society. It represents the career-oriented mind set of the women in Pakistani society. It also indicates that they understand the need and the right to have their own career; it is parallel to existing hierarchies and refers to their sense of identity as an equal human in the society.

“I am studying overseas in a small college in Minnesota....But I never feel completely at ease because there are only three Pakistanis at my school, and I feel that everything I do reflect on my family, my religion, and my country” .

This narration contains relational identification both with respect to work (i.e. my school) and personal relationships i.e. family, religion and country. It highlights a sense of responsibility and loyalty that a girl studying abroad feels towards her family, religion and country. Being a minority student, she is conscious that her behavior should be reflective of her familial, cultural and religious values. Despite the freedom that she enjoys abroad, she continues to exhibit strong ties to her roots.

“When I was working on my doctorate, I discovered on the last day that my thesis was ten pages short, and he [my husband] left his own office to run whatever errands I needed”.

This is a story of a progressive Pakistani woman who is working on her doctorate thesis. This example mirrors a picture of Pakistani women who are independent, educated and striving to better their qualifications. It also illustrates the support system provided by her husband in helping her achieve her goals. This narration contains relational identification of a woman with respect to her work but at the same time acknowledges the support system that makes it possible.

“But my mom was so worried about what people would think”.

This narration indicates the conflict between progressive females and society. Women wanting to take up unconventional professions still face opposition from society and worry about the backlash that their family might face. The victim in this case is an inspiring singer who is forced to yield to societal pressures and as a result quits taking up singing as a profession. This example illustrates that support from

immediate family is still a pre-requisite, by in large for Pakistani women to achieve their dreams.

“I've got to find my family a new place to live by tonight”.

This line reflects the story of a struggling woman, who is single-handedly taking care of her family. She is not dependent upon anyone and has assumed a central role in her family which is typically reserved for a man. This sheds light on the independent status of women in Pakistani society, where they have earned this position to make decisions about their family and to support them financially.

“I was so used to telling my daughter how to act and what to say”.

On this very occasion, the mother decides not to intervene and lets her daughter make her own decision which later makes the mother very proud. This example helps break the stereotype that Pakistani women lack a voice and are constantly under patriarchal control. It goes off to show that confidence entrusted in daughters can translate into making of wise independent decisions. Simultaneously, this statement draws attention to the existing practice of following the norms and passing those norms to the daughters in order to enact gender and avoid social criticism. It refers to the performative nature of gender (Butler, 1999), and also highlights the normative construction of gender identities.

These examples illustrate that Pakistani women are at times driven and at times bounded by their work or personal relationships. The volume of cases identified with respect to relational identification especially where personal and kinship relations are concerned, can be further used to dismiss the concept of individualism promoted by western feminism. The mainstreaming of ‘individual feminism’ calls for women’s rights on the basis of human rights to independence, dismissing the relevance of any biological differences between sexes and culturally and socially constructed gender roles as insignificant for the matter of gender equality. Muslim women movements often reject this notion as it devalues family and inherent biological roles assigned to women (Fernea. 2003).

#### ❖ **Physical Identification**

In the following examples of physical identification, instances of positive appraisement outnumber that of negative ones. In other words, social actors are showcased to be good, loved, admired and possessing other positive qualities.

“Energetic young females are beginning to share influence with older male members”.

This is an important narration as it indicates the whole phenomenon of females' struggle against the outdated patriarchal system. Even men are opening up to the idea of making room for women in public spaces as fight for a common cause requires ideas and initiatives irrespective of where they come from. One of the comments upon this post by a foreigner is as follows, “A girl being Brandon's (HONYs) guide, in a society which western media portray that women have no rights, are not allowed to go out and talk to men. If this isn't a slap on the bigoted media than I don't know what is.”

“It's a difficult time to be a socialist”

This extract has been taken from the story of a female who is a socialist and working against slum evictions in urban cities. This example illustrates that Pakistani women are politically active and are willing to pursue their political ideology against all odds.

“Because wanting to be independent doesn't mean I want to be alone”.

Here the adjective independent has been used for a girl who wants to lead a free life but clarifies the misconception that being independent does not imply choosing to be alone.

“I was never educated because I began working when I was a child. I was always envious of the boys who got to wear uniforms and go to school. This is her first month of school. She comes home and tells me exactly what happened, every day.”

In the example above the woman identifies herself to be uneducated but wants the future of her children to be different. It highlights the growing awareness in society of importance of education as holding the key to progress.

In another narration, one of the females share the support provided by her husband

"He's a very respectful husband. He's different from a lot of the men in this region. He never stops me from voicing my opinions."

Despite being from a rural area, the husband presents a progressive approach which allows his wife to think and act independently. In this example the support system around a woman has been identified positively which in turn allows the women to grow. A comment made on this post is as follows, "Your stories make it so much easier to see humans. It changes one's view from "Pakistan, name of a country I might read about in a newspaper" to "Pakistan, a place where (extra-) ordinary people are living". Every story and picture you share makes the world less abstract and more beautiful, thank you so very much!"

#### ❖ Classification

"Even if it's a story about a Pakistani rock band, it will be set in the context of a violent society. There's nothing false about the perspective. Pakistan has a problem with violence".

In this narration classification is being done with respect to nationality, which implies that the violence-ridden image of Pakistan constructed by mainstream media overshadows whichever segment of Pakistani society is being discussed even if the discussion involves a Pakistani rock band. The above statement indicates that Pakistan is fighting against terrorism as is the rest of the world; however, the country itself should not be classified as a 'terrorist' as this label tends to overshadow all other activities taking place in the country. According to Kanji (2018) acts of Muslim violence receive 1.5 times, on average, more coverage than non-Muslim ones on Canadian national news media. Moreover, Muslim perpetrators are more likely to be labeled by their religious and ethno-racial identities. The above statement also shows that Pakistani women have a political and social world view. They are aware of the image that is being projected of the country and want it rectified.

In another narration one of the Pakistani girls share the hardships which she is facing through the patriarchal family, "I belong to a very conservative family, so I've been dealing with a lot of permission issues. .... My mother is a housewife. She needs to ask my father for everything. When he's not around, she tells me: 'Do exactly what you want to do."

This girl has all the courage to follow her heart despite the odds. Her mother is teaching her ethical values to honor her father, but at the same time she is encouraging her to follow her aspirations as the world needs her skills and perspectives. As Kanwal and Khushi (2017) found in their study that women are multiply positioned in discourse, and they adopt different ways to resist prevailing social practices.

Although, there is nothing wrong in being a housewife; however, forcing someone to lead the life in a particular fashion is not acceptable. Though many Pakistani females can relate to such a situation; however, it does not reflect the story of every household of Pakistan. Not all the fathers want to chain their daughter's down in the name of conservatism. Many Pakistani males and females commented upon this post narrating their non-chauvinistic family set up to argue that such incidents should not be generalized as they do not represent most of the Pakistani girls, "Its post like these that make me realize how blessed I am. I am a female doctor in Pakistan, born in an educated family who encourage me continuously to do whatever I want. I wanted to do specialization. They facilitated me so much on every step. I take all that for granted sometimes."

#### ❖ **Functionalization**

Functionalization is important regarding representation of females as it shows the roles that Pakistani woman want or has assumed. For instance, consider the following examples,

"I want to be a teacher, like my mom".

We get to know the wish of a girl who wants to be a teacher just like her mother. It shows that the choice of profession is in the hands of young generation. Many Pakistani women are contributing in diverse fields, excelling and serving as mentors and inspiration for others.

"I want to be a businesswoman".

This example indicates another choice of profession where the girl wants to be a business woman. It indicates that she is among one of those Pakistani women who are breaking the stereotypical attitude regarding limited choice of professions reserved for them such as teaching, nursing and medicine (Farooq, 2018).

“I wanted to be a singer. I loved music. .... But the community put so much pressure on my mother....”.

Being a girl and living in Hunza, which is a relatively rural side of Pakistan one can understand the restrictions that community imposes upon them in terms of choice of profession. Apart from religious and social restrictions, it is generally considered that there is no career in arts and females are usually encouraged to adopt specific professions. However, the situation is gradually changing as a music school for females is being built in Hunza valley in Pakistan for them to pursue their passion for music. This shows that keeping ones dream alive in one's heart and hoping that things can change is enough for someone to pursue their dreams someday. There will be some who will dream and then there will be others who will materialize their dreams and pave way for others to dream on.

#### ❖ **Instrumentalization**

“The organization she leads, the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, is small but determined”.

Here the ‘Bonded Labor Liberation Front’ has been given a human quality of being determined which in fact refers to the determination of Syeda Ghulam Fatima, the leader of the organization.

“Even within my organization, the patriarchy is being broken down”.

Here the patriarchy has been used for the outdated thoughts of people which are being broken by these struggling women who are not only creating space for themselves in the society but also paving way for the future generation. This is supported by higher number of female students enrolled in schools, colleges and universities and lead to a greater visibility of females in the work force.

### **Discussion**

This study critically analyses the text of Stanton’s well-known blog through Van Luewen’s framework to understand the representation of the social actors from a social standpoint in CDA studies (Esmaeili & Arabmofrad, 2015). It is always of great interest for the researchers to observe how social actors are represented, categorized, nominated, assigned with a unique identity or the function that they

perform in any discourse to construct their identity in any specific direction (Van Leeuwen, 1996). Thus, the categories utilized for data analysis in the present study are useful to show how the identity of female actors is constructed on a famous blog.

'Nomination' helps to identify the social actors through ranks, affiliation, titles honorification, and personal or kinship relations. In this data, Syeda Ghulam Fatima has been introduced to the world in powerful words as "modern-day Harriet Tubman". This story portrays a different side of a Pakistani woman, who is strong, resilient and involved in social activism. 'Functionalization' relate the social actors to any activity in term of an occupation or role. In this data, females have been shown through diverse professions like teacher, businesswoman and singer. It shows that Pakistani women are paving their way towards progress and empowerment despite "a strong feudal and patriarchal social structure, cultural bias against women and the acceptance of traditional customary laws creating an environment that is not conducive to the aspirations of the contemporary women" (Rahman, 2012).

'Classification' refers to social actors in terms of the major categories by means of which a given society or institution differentiates between classes of people. We can observe through various examples that females appear to be in quest of equal rights in the society while challenging the attributes that the society assigns them or defines for them in the social context. The progressive outlook of females as independent and successful characters proves them to be an essential part of the society (Farooq, 2019; Sharma, 2014). 'Identification' defines social actors not in terms of what they do but in terms of what they are. It provides social actors with a unique identity and physical traits which tend to have connotations, and these can be used to obliquely classify or functionalize social actors (Van Leeuwen, 1996). By depicting who they are and who they think they can be no doubt deeply affects what they can reach in the future (Samadi-Maybodi, and Sadeghi-Maleki, 2016, p.315).

The identification process of females indicates changing gender dynamics of Pakistani society where women are becoming ambitious in pursuing careers of their choice. It seems that slowly but steadily, the society is moving in the direction of women's rights where women will be able to pursue their set goals and ambitions. Readers' comments on these posts contribute significantly to constructing the identity of Pakistani women by offering diverse perspectives, challenging stereotypes, and highlighting variations in societal norms. These comments provide

insights into the broader discourse surrounding gender roles, women's empowerment, and societal expectations in Pakistan.

This study proves that Pakistani women are positively influencing almost all walks of life including sports, politics, music, information technology, etc. In this way, they are breaking down the stereotypical Western image of Pakistani Muslim women as being oppressed or uneducated housewives (Charania, 2015).

The underlying data shows progressive women as majority of them have been functionalized and instrumentalized in a positive way. Thus, this study reaffirms that females are competitive, serious, and responsible towards their job and family. This study also establishes that females in Pakistan are well aware of human rights and they are fighting in a systematic way to defy the barriers imposed by old traditions. They are successfully contributing not only to the professional world but also to the family sphere. In many cases, they are taking more burden than their male counterparts to raise the living standards of their family. Even if uneducated, they are supporting their families by working in the fields, serving as maids or adopting various other professions to survive respectfully (Faridi, Chaudri and Anwar, 2009).

Thus, the representation follows the modern trend of the Pakistani society where the females are not only competing but also excelling in various fields of life (Farooq, 2018). The literacy rate of females has remarkably increased in the recent years as they have started opting for diverse fields in education comprising medical, engineering, and telecommunication etc. (XYZ, 20XX). It may also be pleasant to share that majority of the topper in educational fields are females. According to Gallup Polls 2017, 48% Pakistani think that both male and females are provided equal opportunities of education and profession while 54 % favored males and 40 % favored females.

However, despite all these success stories, it is also a tragic fact that the Western media usually portrays them as suppressed victim of social, economic, and cultural taboo. It is argued that "while the western media rushes to highlight the negative attitudes, it never highlights positive aspects and women active participation in the fields which are usually dominated by men" (Rahman, 2012, 109). Thus, the study challenges the idea of single- and one-dimensional "truth" about Pakistani women, also the individuals have multiple subject positions and identities influenced by

their ideological repertoires and this multiplicity is reflected through the discourses that they use in their social lives (Kanwal & Khushi, 2017). The researcher agrees with Risman (2004) that gender is a social construct and by doing research and paying attention to how gender is structured through language can help transform as well as inform society. Furthermore, the inclusion of positive gender identities in media may lead to elimination of the discriminated and obscured image of Pakistani females.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of Stanton's famous web blog indicates that Pakistan is gradually opening up its public spaces to women. HONY's webpage has managed to promote Pakistan as a place where a vibrant nation lives which is in contrast to how it is projected in mainstream media where it is seen as a monolithic entity which is a hub of extremists and bigots and where there is no civilization. Moreover, it is projected in mainstream media as a place where only patriarchy rules and the rights of women are subjugated where schools are bombed and human values don't exist at all. Stanton through his work asserts that this is not the whole story as only a small portion of the society gets exposed through mainstream western media while rest of the picture is not even shared or told. A Critical discourse analysis undertaken to uncover the image of Pakistani women constructed via this web blog reveals that an active, resilient and a hardworking image of Pakistani women emerges, who is actively contributing in the social activism and other development activities in the country. They are more enlightened, career oriented and well aware about their identity as an equal human in the society.

This study is undertaken to raise awareness as to how the authors use their strong authority to manipulate power of words to construct specific identities. By being able to trace out the influence and underpinnings of inculcating stereotypes in language, we can learn to use language in a more responsible way. It is assumed that the present study will help promote non-discriminating discursive practices to construct Pakistani women identities in the Western mainstream media.

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Notes:

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1. Refer to "Humans of New York" webpage <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/aboutor> <https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/>.
2. Malala Yousafzai is a Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest Nobel Prize laureate. In 2012 she was shot by Taliban for resisting the ban on female education in her home town, Swat Pakistan.
3. Appendix contains only the cases that are explicitly discussed in the paper. The entire data of 22 women-centric cases are available on request.
4. The reader comments are taken from "Humans of New York" Facebook page, accessed on 24th January 2019. Refer to [https://www.facebook.com/pg/humansofnewyork/posts/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/humansofnewyork/posts/?ref=page_internal)
5. Refer to narration [1] in Appendix.
6. Refer to narration [6] in Appendix.
7. Refer to narration [7] in Appendix.
8. Refer to narration [9] in Appendix.
9. Refer to narration [12] in Appendix.
10. Refer to narration [8] in Appendix.
11. Refer to narration [4] in Appendix.
12. Refer to narration [10] in Appendix.
13. Refer to narration [11] in Appendix.
14. Refer to narration [6] in Appendix.
15. Refer to narration [14] in Appendix
16. Refer to narration [13] in Appendix
17. Refer to narration [2] in Appendix.
18. Refer to narration [5] in Appendix.
19. Refer to narration [3] in Appendix.
20. Refer to narration [5] in Appendix.
21. Refer to narration [12] in Appendix
22. Refer to narration [1] in Appendix.
23. Refer to narration [10] in Appendix.

## **Appendix**

### **❖ Narrations used for data analysis**

1. Meet Syeda Ghulam Fatima. Described as a modern-day Harriet Tubman, Fatima has devoted her life to ending bonded labor. She has been shot, electrocuted, and beaten numerous times for her activism. Quite literally, she places herself between the workers and their owners. The organization she leads, the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, is small but determined. It is working to set up Freedom Centers throughout rural Pakistan so that every bonded laborer has access to advocacy and legal aid. Fatima operates on a very small budget. So, as we learn her story over the next few days, anyone wishing to help empower Fatima can donate to Bonded Labour Liberation Front here:
2. "It seems that violence is the only lens through which ordinary people in Pakistan are viewed in the media. Even if it's a story about a Pakistani rock band, it will be set in the context of a violent society. There's nothing false about the perspective. Pakistan has a problem with violence. Violence is used to silence journalists, and judges, and moderate religious scholars. And it seems to be getting worse. Every time I see somebody on television speaking out in anger against extremism or corruption—I'll say a prayer for them. And every time one of those people is murdered, those of us who aspire to be like them grow a little more afraid. So, it's not that the reports of violence are false. But they are only a small part of the truth. There's so much other life being lived here. But there's only so much space in international newspapers. And there's so much news in the world. So only the most jarring stories make the cut." (Karachi, Pakistan)
3. "I want to be a teacher, like my mom." "What's the key to being a good teacher?" "Don't hit the children." (Karachi, Pakistan)
4. "On her sixth birthday, two of her friends came over and brought her presents. One of the presents was big, and the other was small. The friend who'd brought the big present was laughing at the smaller present. It was so hard for me to not intervene. I was so used to telling my daughter how to act and what to say. But I decided that this time I'd sit back and see how she responded. "I like both my presents the same," she said. And I remember feeling so proud, because I knew that what I'd been teaching her was working." (Karachi, Pakistan)
5. "I belong to a very conservative family, so I've been dealing with a lot of permission issues. There are a lot of boundaries on me. Most of the women in my family are housewives, and my father would prefer me to become a housewife as well. But I've been working so hard in school. I'm studying all the freaking time. These exams are so tough. I don't want all this hard work to be wasted. I want to be a businesswoman. My mother is a

housewife. She needs to ask my father for everything. When he's not around, she tells me: 'Do exactly what you want to do.' (Karachi, Pakistan)

6. "I want to have my own career. I don't want to depend on anyone else. But there's a view in our society that an independent woman doesn't belong here. She is not 'one of us.' So, if you want to do some things on your own, they expect you to do everything on your own. And that's difficult. Because wanting to be independent doesn't mean I want to be alone." (Karachi, Pakistan)

7. "I'm studying overseas at a small college in Minnesota. I'm just home for the summer. There's definitely more outward freedom in the states to wear what I want and do what I want. But I never feel completely at ease because there are only three Pakistanis at my school, and I feel that everything I do reflects on my family, my religion, and my country. I feel pressured to always be exceedingly polite and well behaved, even when I don't feel like it. But in Pakistan I can relax more, even though the electricity sometimes goes out and I've already been mugged twice since I've been back. Because here I feel like my actions only reflect on me." (Hunza Valley, Pakistan)

8. "I just found out we've been evicted. Right after you leave, I'm going to start packing up. I've got to find my family a new place to live by tonight. The landlady is a good woman. She's just in a tough situation. Her disabled son lost his home. I'll handle it. I've been through worse." (Hunza Valley, Pakistan)

9. "When I was working on my doctorate, I discovered on the last day that my thesis was ten pages short, and he left his own office to run whatever errands I needed. He didn't even have a car. He took a rickshaw. I had a dream when I was deciding whether or not to marry him. I was falling through the air, but I didn't feel any fear, because I knew that he would catch me." (Hunza Valley, Pakistan)

10. "One beautiful thing about advocating for the poor is that feminist ideals are advanced naturally. In order to fight eviction from their homes, women who patriarchy has kept secluded have been allowed to emerge into public life. Their husbands have been forced to choose their homes over their idea of honor. Even within my organization, the patriarchy is being broken down. Energetic young females are beginning to share influence with older male members. When you're in a tough fight for a common cause, you can't afford to be choosy about where the best ideas are coming from." (Hunza Valley, Pakistan)

11. "It's a difficult time to be a socialist. The left has been depleted everywhere else, but in Pakistan it's been decimated. I belong to an organization called the Awami Worker's Party, and right now is a crucial moment for us. We are trying to resist slum evictions in Islamabad. There is no affordable housing in the city, so servants and laborers huddle together in informal settlements called kachi abadis, which have no water or electricity.

Recently, the Islamabad high court has issued an eviction notice, and the land is being sold out beneath them. They are defending their actions by saying that terrorists hide in the slums. Right now, an operation is underway to remove the slum inhabitants by force." (Hunza Valley, Pakistan)

<sup>12</sup>. "I wanted to be a singer. I loved music. I practiced all the time and worked on writing songs for myself. I loved sad songs especially. But the community put so much pressure on my mother. My father passed away when I was twelve. And everyone kept telling my mother that a girl could not be something like a singer without her father's permission. My father wouldn't have minded. He was always so supportive of me. But my mom was so worried about what people would think. She begged me to stop. She grew so nervous that I finally told her, 'It's OK, Mom. I'll stop.' Now I just listen to music. It's too sad for me to sing anymore." (Hunza Valley, Pakistan)

<sup>13</sup>. "He's a very respectful husband. He's different from a lot of the men in this region. He never stops me from voicing my opinions. And if he ever notices me walking down the road, there's always hot tea and apricot cake waiting when I arrive." (Passu, Pakistan)

<sup>14</sup>. "I was never educated because I began working when I was a child. I was always envious of the boys who got to wear uniforms and go to school. This is her first month of school. She comes home and tells me exactly what happened, every day. I love it. If I'm not home for a few days, she'll save up all her stories, then tell them to me all at once." (Lahore, Pakistan)

Article Information:

<i>Received</i>	<u>10-Aug-2024</u>
<i>Revised</i>	<u>12-Nov-2024</u>
<i>Accepted</i>	<u>21-Nov-2024</u>
<i>Published</i>	<u>15-Dec-2024</u>

Declarations:

Authors' Contribution:

- All authors **Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions. Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript**
- The authors agree to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed
- **Conflict of Interest:** NIL
- **Funding Sources:** NIL

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