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## **Reframing Silence: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender, Power, and Media Literacy in Pakistani Television Drama *Working Women* (2023)**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the role of silence as a feminist discourse in the Pakistani Television drama *Working Women* (2023), analyzing its portrayal of women's oppression, agency, and resistance within a patriarchal society. Using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research explores how linguistic and non-linguistic cues – particularly silence – reveal intersections of gender, power, and ideology. The drama's dialogues and character portrayals are analyzed across textual, discursive, and social levels to demonstrate how silence operates as both a site of subjugation and a tool of empowerment. The analysis identifies eight core themes, including patriarchal oppression, workplace silence, and the normalization of women's suffering. Findings reveal that silence is not merely the absence of speech but a socially constructed mechanism that reflects constrained agency and resistance. The study argues that this critical decoding of silence models a vital media literacy competency: the ability to deconstruct how media texts encode complex power dynamics. The study concludes that *Working Women* subverts traditional passive femininity, serving as a potent resource for feminist media literacy education, framing silence as a complex communicative act that exposes systemic inequality and equips audiences to critically reinterpret gendered discourse in Pakistani media.

**Keywords:** Pakistani media, working women, feminist discourse analysis, silence, critical discourse analysis, feminist theory.

### **1. Introduction**

In contemporary media studies, the representation of women in television dramas has evolved from simple character portrayals to complex discourses that both reflect and shape social ideologies. Pakistani television acts as a cultural mirror that reproduces and contests gendered norms, offering insight into shifting power dynamics and social expectations (Fairclough, 2023; Naeem, Zaidi, 2024). Dramas such as *Working Women* (2023) not only depict stories of female resilience but also expose the discursive structures that sustain or challenge patriarchal values (Ashfaq, Shafiq, 2018).

The depiction of women's silence, agency, and resistance aligns with Butler's notion of performative discourse, suggesting that language and silence are both active forces that construct social reality. Silence, therefore, becomes more than a void; it transforms into a strategic form of resistance and identity expression (Acheson, 2008; Butler, 2021; Lee, 2010; Tabassum, Amin, 2020). In *Working Women*, silence operates as a gendered discourse that simultaneously reflects oppression and subtle defiance, resonating with DeFrancisco's argument that male communication often marginalizes women's voices within institutional contexts.

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Recent analyses of Pakistani media highlight how female representation continues to oscillate between idealized domesticity and stigmatized independence, reinforcing and reshaping cultural notions of femininity (Jehangir, 2023; Mishra, 2015). This pattern supports the social-role perspective of gender behavior, which maintains that media discourse plays a significant role in reproducing gendered social scripts (Eagly, 1987; Feingold, 1994).

This study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional model to analyze *Working Women* (2023) through textual, discursive, and sociocultural lenses. Drawing upon feminist communication theories, it explores how silence and speech function as tools of gendered power negotiation in Pakistani television narratives. Moreover, it situates the drama within

broader media frameworks that define how femininity is culturally constructed and contested (Gallagher, 2005; Myrntinen et al, 2025).

This study argues that *Working Women* (2023) illustrates how female silence operates both as compliance and subversion, aligning with Foucault's conception of power as relational and fluid. By decoding its linguistic and narrative patterns, this research exposes how Pakistani dramas sustain or resist gender ideologies, offering insights into the evolving landscape of women's representation in digital-era media (Ali, 2022).

By decoding its linguistic and narrative patterns, this research exposes how Pakistani dramas sustain or resist gender ideologies, offering insights into the evolving landscape of women's representation in digital-era media (Ali, 2022). This study is therefore driven by the central question: How does silence function as a feminist discourse in *Working Women* (2023)? This primary inquiry is explored through the following sub-questions:

1. How is silence represented at the textual, discursive, and social levels in the drama?
2. In what ways does silence operate as both a mechanism of patriarchal oppression and a strategy of female agency and resistance?
3. How can this critical analysis of silence inform the development of feminist media literacy education in Pakistan?

## 2. Materials and methods

This study employs Norman's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how silence operates as a feminist discourse in the Pakistani television drama *Working Women* (Fairclough, 2023). The model views discourse as a social practice and integrates linguistic, interpretative, and socio-cultural dimensions of meaning-making. Within this framework, silence is analyzed not merely as an absence of speech but as a communicative act that reflects and challenges structures of power. The idea of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis also complements the idea of gender and power relations within discourse (Lazar, 2005). This complements Fairclough's model by foregrounding gender and power relations within discourse.

The research adopts a qualitative design, which is best suited for exploring complex social phenomena such as gendered communication and silence in media. The aim is not to quantify the presence of silence but to interpret its meanings, functions, and implications within specific contexts. By analyzing selected scenes and dialogues, the study seeks to uncover how silence contributes to feminist discourse through narrative choices, character interactions, and visual symbolism. This study applies Fairclough's three dimensions as an analytical structure:

*Textual Analysis:* At this level, the linguistic and semiotic features of selected scenes are analyzed. This includes verbal interactions, pauses, gestures, tone, and moments of silence. The analysis examines how silence functions in contrast to speech – whether it signifies submission, protest, reflection, or defiance. Visual elements such as camera focus, lighting, and framing are also interpreted as part of the text since they contribute to the construction of meaning.

*Discursive Practice:* This dimension explores how *Working Women* constructs, circulates, and reproduces discourses about gender and power. It considers the production and consumption processes of the drama – how audiences interpret female silence, and how the creators' choices reflect broader societal ideologies. Attention is paid to how silence is positioned within dialogues and scenes to produce certain meanings about women's agencies and oppression.

*Social Practice:* The final dimension situates the drama within the larger socio-cultural and ideological context of Pakistani society. This level interprets silence as a reflection of patriarchal structures, social norms, and moral expectations that regulate female behavior. It also explores how silence serves as a form of resistance, allowing women to navigate and subtly challenge gendered hierarchies.

The primary data for this study are derived from selected scenes of *Working Women*, directed by Yasra Rizvi and produced by Green TV. Sixteen episodes were available for viewing, but the analysis focuses on key scenes featuring one of the characters, Aasha, and other female characters such as Nusrat, Sadia, and Rosie. These scenes were selected based on their relevance to the study's central theme – instances where silence is foregrounded as a communicative or narrative element. 16 episodes were deeply analyzed.

The analysis was conducted in multiple stages. First, the researcher identified moments of silence, verbal suppression, or hesitation across the episodes. Each instance was transcribed with attention to non-verbal cues such as gestures, gaze, and pauses. The data were then coded thematically according to the functions of silence, for instance, silence as compliance, silence as resistance, or silence as trauma. These themes were interpreted through Fairclough's CDA model, connecting linguistic and semiotic patterns with social meanings.

To ensure academic rigor, the study employed triangulation through feminist theoretical perspectives and secondary sources on Pakistani media and gender studies. This helped validate interpretations and situate findings within broader scholarly discussions. Moreover, reflexivity was maintained throughout the process – the researcher remained conscious of their interpretative position and potential biases when analyzing the text.

As the study is based on publicly available media content, it does not involve human participants or sensitive personal data. However, ethical integrity was maintained by acknowledging sources, accurately representing media material, and avoiding speculative or culturally insensitive interpretations. The analysis respects the creative intent of the drama while critically engaging with its ideological implications.

Fairclough's CDA framework is particularly suitable for this study because it integrates language analysis with social theory, allowing a nuanced examination of silence as a gendered discourse. The combination of CDA and FCDA facilitates a multidimensional understanding of how language, silence, and media representation interact to reproduce or resist patriarchal ideologies. Through this methodological approach, the research not only interprets *Working Women* as a cultural text but also as a social practice that both mirrors and critiques the gendered realities of Pakistani society.

### 3. Discussion

The representation of women in media has been a central theme within critical media studies, where television serves not merely as an entertainment source but as an ideological apparatus that constructs, normalizes, and contests gendered realities (Fairclough, 2023). Within Pakistani television dramas, this function becomes particularly significant, as the screen operates as both a reflection and a reinforcement of patriarchal social order (Ashfaq, Shafiq, 2018). Previous research demonstrates that female representation in Pakistani dramas continues to vacillate between empowerment and subordination, producing complex portrayals that simultaneously challenge and maintain gender hierarchies (Naeem, Zaidi, 2024). These portrayals often mirror cultural anxieties surrounding the modern, educated woman whose social mobility disrupts conventional domestic ideals (Tabassum, Amin, 2020).

Discourse analysts have long maintained that gender is discursively constructed, and the media becomes a crucial space where such constructions are reproduced and negotiated. In the context of Pakistani dramas, women's dialogues, gestures, and even silences become performative sites of meaning where femininity is enacted according to social expectations. This view resonates with social-role theories, which argue that gendered behaviors are learned and reinforced through repeated cultural narratives (Feingold, 1994). Hence, the television screen becomes a pedagogical space where audiences internalize patterns of subservience and idealized womanhood (Gallagher, 2005). However, this process is not unidirectional; it also allows for the articulation of alternative discourses that subtly resist dominant ideologies by portraying women as autonomous, working, and intellectually assertive (Mishra, 2015).

A growing body of feminist media research has emphasized silence as an overlooked but potent form of gendered expression (Acheson, 2008). Silence functions as a communicative gesture rather than an absence of speech, allowing women to navigate restrictive discursive spaces (Lee, 2010). Within South Asian cultures, silence frequently acquires a layered significance – it becomes a strategy of survival, endurance, and even rebellion (Tannen, 2011). Muted Group Theory further explains this phenomenon by suggesting that women's access to dominant linguistic

codes is limited, forcing them to develop alternative means of communication (Kramarae, 2001). Such muted forms, including silence, become subversive tools that challenge patriarchal discourse from within.

Despite considerable scholarship on gender representation in Pakistani media, the specific role of silence as a feminist discourse remains underexplored (Naeem, Zaidi, 2024). Most existing analyses have focused on visible markers of empowerment – such as employment, education, and independence – without considering the subtle linguistic performances that articulate resistance (Ashfaq, Shafiq, 2018). The conception of power as relational offers a valuable lens for understanding how silence can simultaneously express compliance and defiance (Deetz, Mumby, 2012). Therefore, examining *Working Women* through Fairclough's three-dimensional model provides a rich opportunity to understand how silence, speech, and representation intersect to shape public perceptions of femininity. This study extends existing literature by uncovering how Pakistani television dramas encode resistance not merely in spoken dialogues but in the spaces where women choose not to speak, revealing silence as a deeply political act embedded in everyday media discourse (Foucault, 2014).

By merging CDA and Feminist CDA, the study uncovers how silence in Pakistani media is both a product of and a response to gendered oppression. The drama reconfigures silence from a sign of weakness to a symbol of resilience, enabling women to navigate social constraints without entirely rejecting cultural values. This duality makes silence an inherently feminist discourse – one that challenges the very systems that attempt to suppress it.

Furthermore, this research underscores the importance of media literacy education in Pakistan. As television dramas continue to influence social attitudes and shape gender perceptions, it becomes essential to equip audiences – particularly women and young viewers – with the skills to critically analyze and interpret media content. Integrating feminist media literacy into educational and community programs enables audiences to recognize ideological manipulation and question gender stereotypes represented in drama narratives. This aspect not only aligns with the objectives of Critical Discourse Analysis but also enhances social awareness through informed and reflective media consumption (Hobbs, 2017; Kellner, Share, 2019).

#### 4. Results

Following the methodological framework and theoretical discussion, this section presents the analytical findings. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this section presents the findings of how *Working Women 2023* constructs silence as a feminist discourse across textual, discursive, and social levels. Silence is examined not as mere muteness but as a communicative resource that reveals internalized oppression, societal control, and women's subtle forms of defiance. The analysis identifies eight interrelated themes that together demonstrate how silence functions as both a symptom of subjugation and a strategy of empowerment within the patriarchal media landscape (Fairclough, 2023).

##### *Theme 1: Silence as a Manifestation of Patriarchal Oppression*

At the textual level, the drama repeatedly portrays silence as a response to male authority. In scenes, female characters – especially Aasha – were seen lowering their gaze or remaining quiet when confronted by men in positions of power. Such silence aligns with Fairclough's notion of ideological language, where social hierarchies are linguistically and behaviorally reinforced through everyday practices.

For example, Aasha symbolizes the internalization of patriarchal discipline, reflecting Foucault's idea of self-regulation through discourse. Yet, this silence also exposes the coercive structures that silence women's professional voices in Pakistani society. Through camera focus and minimal dialogue, the text constructs silence as both submission and a coded commentary on the lack of gender inclusivity in institutional spaces.

##### *Theme 2: Professional Spaces and the Reinforcement of Gendered Silence*

In *Working Women*, the workplace becomes a microcosm of patriarchal order. Silence is strategically imposed upon women through systemic dismissal of their opinions and subtle ridicule of their ambitions. At the discursive level, Fairclough's second dimension – the production and interpretation of discourse – reveals how silence is socially reproduced.

The professional environment discourages women from asserting themselves, marking their silence as a form of "appropriate behavior." Aasha's colleagues interpret her restraint as professionalism, whereas in reality, it emerges from gendered anxiety and fear of backlash. This

reveals the power of discourse to disguise oppression as etiquette. Feminist CDA interprets such silences as discursive constructions that maintain gender asymmetry under the façade of decorum and discipline.

*Theme 3: Domesticity and the Normalization of Women's Suffering*

Within the social dimension of Fairclough's model, the drama situates silence within domestic settings as a cultural expectation. Characters like Nusrat and Sadia embody the silent endurance idealized in Pakistani households. Their quiet suffering reflects symbolic violence, where women's compliance is romanticized as moral strength.

The repeated Imagery of women silently performing household chores or enduring emotional neglect reinforces patriarchal ideologies that equate femininity with patience and silence. However, Fairclough's approach helps uncover the ideological work performed by these depictions, by presenting silence as virtue, the media text naturalizes women's subordination. Yet, by showing the psychological toll of this silence, *Working Women* simultaneously critiques this normalization.

*Theme 4: Silence as Emotional Resilience and Inner Strength*

Contrary to oppressive readings, *Working Women* also constructs silence as an act of inner resilience. In certain moments, Aasha's silence functions as resistance rather than compliance. Fairclough's textual analysis highlights how tonal shifts, camera angles, and expressions reframe silence as empowerment.

For instance, in an emotionally charged scene where Aasha confronts her employer's unjust decision, her refusal to respond verbally signifies control over her emotions – a form of communicative self-defense. Within feminist discourse theory, this silence operates as strategic agency, allowing women to reclaim dignity without confrontation. Through such portrayals, the drama redefines silence as a gendered tool of survival that coexists with resistance, embodying Fairclough's view of discourse as a site of struggle.

*Theme 5: Collective Silence and Solidarity among Women*

Silence in *Working Women* also emerges as a shared experience that binds women together. In scenes depicting female coworkers exchanging silent glances of empathy or mutual understanding, silence transcends linguistic boundaries to become a feminist language of solidarity.

At the discursive practice level, this theme reflects how shared silences constitute counter-discourses within patriarchal institutions. By refusing to engage verbally in hostile environments, the women collectively construct an alternative communicative space that defies male authority. Fairclough's framework situates such practices within interdiscursive, where silence intersects with expressions of sisterhood and collective identity. Hence, *Working Women* portrays silence not as isolation but as a unifying gesture that strengthens women's presence in spaces where their voices are marginalized.

*Theme 6: Media Representation and the Ideological Framing of Silence*

Applying Fairclough's social practice dimension, *Working Women* can be read as a media product that both reflects and critiques dominant ideologies. Pakistani television historically portrays vocal women as rebellious and immoral, while silent women are idealized. The drama deliberately reverses this trope by giving moral credibility to women who remain silent strategically rather than submissively.

Through close textual analysis, it becomes evident that silence functions as a cinematic technique that shapes audience perception. The frequent use of prolonged pauses and slow camera movements emphasizes emotional depth and moral gravity. This semiotic representation positions silence as a critical narrative device that challenges sensationalized portrayals of female suffering in mainstream dramas. Thus, silence becomes a vehicle of feminist critique within Pakistan's media discourse.

*Theme 7: The Transformation of Silence into Voice*

One of the most significant thematic transitions in *Working Women* is the gradual transformation of silence into speech. Aasha's journey from silence to articulation symbolizes a feminist awakening. Through Fairclough's discursive lens, this evolution reflects how social structures are negotiated through individual agency.

The drama's narrative progression illustrates that silence is not static but fluid, shifting from repression to empowerment. Aasha's eventual decision to speak out against harassment demonstrates that silence, when consciously employed, can become the foundation for reclaiming voice. This aligns with feminist scholars, who argue that breaking the silence is a political act of resistance. The transformation thus reinforces Fairclough's principle that discourse has transformative potential, capable of reshaping power relations within the social world.

### *Theme 8: Silence as a Mirror of Cultural Morality*

Finally, *Working Women* situates silence within Pakistan's broader moral and cultural framework. Women's silence is linked to ideas of honor, modesty, and respectability.

Fairclough's third dimension reveals how these moral discourses are sustained through institutional and media practices.

Aasha's silence in moments of public humiliation demonstrates how cultural expectations regulate female expression. Speaking out may be equated with shamelessness, while silence preserves social dignity. Yet, the drama subtly undermines this ideology by exposing the emotional costs of such moral conformity. Through this, silence becomes both a mirror of social morality and a critique of its gendered limitations. The semiotic emphasis on restraint and body language reflects the performative nature of femininity in patriarchal contexts – that gender identity is enacted through repetitive acts shaped by social norms (Butler, 2021).

Across these eight themes, *Working Women* constructs silence as a multifaceted feminist discourse that both reflects and contests patriarchal power. Fairclough's CDA reveals that at the textual level, silence operates through linguistic absence and visual framing; at the discursive level, it shapes power negotiations among characters; and at the social level, it mirrors cultural ideologies that define women's moral worth.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of *Working Women 2023* through Fairclough's three-dimensional model reveals that silence is not simply an absence of speech, but a powerful feminist discourse embedded in social, cultural, and ideological contexts. Each theme – from patriarchal oppression to societal bias – reflects how women's silence simultaneously embodies trauma, endurance, and subtle resistance. Silence functions as both a communicative act and a social critique, enabling women to navigate structures of domination while expressing resistance through non-verbal means.

The study also highlights that Pakistani television dramas, particularly *Working Women*, serve as microcosms of society where gendered power hierarchies are not only mirrored but questioned. Characters like Aasha and Hashmat demonstrate how women in South Asia negotiate agency under restrictive circumstances – using silence, expression, or defiance as tools of self-preservation and empowerment.

By applying Fairclough's CDA framework, the research uncovers how media texts reproduce and challenge patriarchal ideologies. At the textual level, dialogues and gestures signify embedded gender expectations; at the discursive level, production choices reinforce or subvert societal norms; and at the social level, silence symbolizes broader structures of inequality and resistance.

This study concludes that *Working Women* transforms silence from a symbol of submission into a strategy of resilience. The drama not only problematizes women's oppression but also positions silence as a conscious feminist discourse – one that exposes, critiques, and redefines women's roles in a patriarchal media landscape. The integration of feminist media literacy within Pakistani academia and broadcasting policies could contribute to building a more equitable and informed media landscape. Further research could explore comparative studies across regional dramas to examine how silence, gender, and resistance interact in South Asian media cultures.

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