Discursive Constructions of Child Rape in Pakistani Newspapers: A Study of Hussain Khan Wala Case

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study identifies the types and nature of media discourses of child rape that may be intended to maintain gender ideologies and power relations around normative sexual practices.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This research study is conducted from the social constructivist perspective about gender and sex in connection with the dynamics of power relations in the Pakistani social system. Data for analysis consisted of all editorials and opinion columns about the Hussain Khan Wala Case in the Urdu newspaper Daily Nawa-e-Waqt and English newspaper Dawn. Hussain Khan Wala’s case was a highlight in the media in August 2015. The victims were minor and the incident grabbed the most attention of the press and public. For discourse analysis, newspaper articles (editorials and opinion columns) were selected because these texts present detailed discussion (nature of the problem, causes, effects, solutions, and value judgments) about the phenomenon.

Findings: In theoretical terms, Pakistani media dominantly discusses child sexual abuse including rape in the context of political power disparity in rural and urban areas. In Pakistani media, child rape is delinked from adult rape and sexual practices. The blame for child sexual abuse is shifted to political and administrative officialdom.

Implications/Originality/Value: The media is structurally and ideologically unsuitable for conservative values and unable to disseminate the values of shame, modesty, piety, and dignity.

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Introduction
Rape is not only a release of sexual energy and a manifestation of sexual drive and desire but
also a form of revenge, the show of power, intimidation, psychological and physical damage, violation of body rights, stigmatization, hate for other's honor, the act of masculinist pride performance, sexual adventure and punishment, and a sub-industry for media, academia and the nation-state (Gaskin, 2019). Child sexual abuse is a global phenomenon (Stoltenborgh, Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011) in which child rape and murder after rape or rape after the murder is the niche area yet to be explored. Child rape cases generally remain obscure under the general, broader category of child sexual abuse, and the gender dimensions are ignored under the rubric of violence against women. In Pakistani society, the perpetrators are men and the victims include women, girls, and minor boys. Sahil reports in 2019 that the reported child rape cases in 2018 numbered 537, apart from the 156 gang rape cases while an average of 10 boys were being sexually abused daily and the ratio of child sexual abuse is highest in Punjab (Imdad, 2019).

Child rape has become a prominent phenomenon in Pakistan but the legal framework still avoids the usage of the term. Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2016 criminalizes "child exposure to seduction, child pornography, cruelty to a child, trafficking in human beings and child abuse". In 2019, the Government of Pakistan's Report of the Senate Special Committee on the Issue of Increasing Incidents of Child Abuse admits the failure of social circles, law enforcement agencies, courts, media, and parents but at the same time consciously avoid "Child Rape" despite the widely reported cases of child rape. Child abuse may involve abuse of any form that is not strictly sexual or it may involve sexual abuse that bears fewer consequences such as kissing and caressing. Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act, 2020 acknowledges the "abduction", "rape" and "murder" of 7-year-old Zainab and defines rape as "any forcible and non-forcible sexual conduct with a child by another person". Therefore, the study analyzes the exclusive phenomenon of "child rape" instead of broader categories of child abuse or child sexual abuse.

Newspapers report the events of child sexual abuse regularly but this reporting and production of texts in media are constituted by dominant gender discourses and constitutive to the gender stereotypes. Terms such as sexual exploitation and child protection repeatedly appear in the media texts but one is never certain of the child rape cases due to the conceptual confusion of the issues. There are mere estimates of child sexual abuse and no systematic data exists about the cases of child rape (Jabeen, 2021). All the data on child sexual abuse is collected based on media reports. Hundreds of cases go unreported even by the media due to family honor and shame (Maul, Khan, Mian, Yousafzai, & Brown, 2019; Nadeem, Asad, & Hamid, 2020). Child abuse including rape may have a higher ratio than the reported cases as Pakistan has 70 million population below 18 years and a significant proportion of this young population is living in poverty and homelessness (Maul, Khan, Mian, Yousafzai, & Brown, 2019). Pakistani traditional practices and taboos also play a role in the underreporting of child rape cases.

Social and cultural conceptions of gender, power hierarchy, and sexuality reflected through media texts indicate a "rape culture" (Gaskin, 2019) where sexual assaults and rape cases are normalized and pervasive (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2015). In recent years, rape culture has become an accepted and acknowledged term in the Pakistani English press. Pakistani film industry normalizes and legitimizes rape culture through the promotion and featuring of sexual aggression and cultural ideologies of honor and patriarchy (Ahmad, 2016). This rape culture idealizes gender traits and encourages sexual aggression. In Pakistani gender discourses rape is constructed as punishment and entertainment. Sadaf Ahmad (2016) argues that Pakistani patriarchal society labels women into "good" and "bad" categories based on obedience, sacrifice, domestication, and lack of independence. Women are judged on the bases of morality and morality is associated with the sexual behavior and body qualities of women (Khan, 2006). These moral divisions actively and exclusively work against the women who are morally policed and regulated in the structures of patriarchy (Saeed, 2001). A woman's sexual behavior is
associated with family honor and this link serves as a structural antecedent of rape culture. This rape culture then reinforces myths of rape in which victims are blamed and the rapists often go unpunished and excused. Thus, rape is encouraged in Pakistan through the permeating ideologies of honor, shame, hegemonic gendered norms, and chastity and has become a phenomenon of power, punishment, control, and revenge in Pakistani society (Ahmad, 2016). The cultural conceptions of honour help shift the blame of rape on the victims in rape cases of married women (Canto, Perles, & Martín, 2017). Fundamentalist interpretations of sacred texts to legitimize the patriarchal structures serve as the root cause for all problems according to feminists in Pakistan (Sarwar & Zeng, 2021). To uproot this cause, feminist scholars hope that media texts can play a role in subverting the subjugation of women and the all-pervasive culture of shame (Gershon, 2020).

Similar logical structures do hold in the case of child rape which has become a proportionally prominent phenomenon in Pakistani society. Rape, now, is not limited to adult women or "bad" girls but its tentacles have reached the bodies of the vulnerable, innocent, and normal boys and girls. Now six or seven-year-old girls and boys are not safe from rapists. The frequency, normity, and expansion of rape cases cannot be left wrapped into softer labels of child abuse and child sexual abuse. The incident of Hussain Khan Wala indicates serious loopholes in our legal framework, certain gender ideologies, specific fatal traits of masculinity and femininity, patterns of parenting, moral decay, commercial motives, entertainment imperatives, repressed sexualities, repressive cultural norms, and stereotypical characterizations and presentations of these cases in the media texts. The majority of people in Pakistan believe in rape myths and sexual double standards bearing the gendered biases, masculine power, and authority (Jamshed & Kamal, 2019). It is need of the hour that now we explore the intricate associations of ideologies of gender, power, and sexuality and their reproduction and reinforcement in the media reports to inform and revise our policies on gendered values, power relations, and sexual taboos.

Newspapers not only report cases of child sexual abuse but also represents the social problems and act as a tool of advocacy (Nair, 2019). The role of media as a social institution is the focus of this analysis. This study identifies the types and nature of media discourses on child rape that may be intended to maintain gender ideologies and power relations around normative sexual practices. The study analyzed the press articles that discussed and interpreted child rape in Hussain Khan Wala. The editorials and opinion columns in the press are produced explicitly from an ideological perspective and intended to produce desired ideological norms. The discourses of power, gender, and sexuality are identified in the articles debating and discussing rape crimes.

**Methodology**

This research study is conducted from the social constructivist perspective about gender and sex in connection with the dynamics of power relations in the Pakistani social system. The study is conducted with intersectional methodology using the discourse theory to analyze media texts. The intersection of discourse theory and textual analysis of media texts will delineate the connections of gender, power, language, and ideology within the broader Pakistani social context.

According to Fairclough, the best possible way to analyze the power relations of a system is to analyze its ideological constructions that require discourse analysis. Ideology is embedded in textual elements that sustain and maintain the power relations allowed by the ideology. When, through textual elements in a discursive manner, ideology is transformed into common sense then it is naturalized (Fairclough, 2010, pp. 26-30). Hence, in both theoretical perspectives, the focus of discourse analysis is on the dominant discourses that are seemingly natural and objective. Since the discourse is contingent so it can be deconstructed through the de-
naturalization of ideologies (Fairclough, 2010, pp. 30-31). This means that power relations can be transformed through critical discourse analysis. The connection of discourse and construction of sex, gender, and rape are only meaningful when the system and relations of power are considered in the analysis. Following the exemplary as explained by Fairclough (1993), the two levels (discourse practice and interpretation) are described and explained separately for each text but the third level (social practice) is an aggregate of all the texts. This helps draw the overall social and cultural context and interdiscursivity in which each text was produced and interpreted and the discourses were constructed.

For discourse analysis, newspaper articles (editorials and opinion columns) were selected because these texts present detailed discussion (nature of the problem, causes, effects, solutions, and value judgments) about the phenomenon. The purpose is to excavate organizational ideologies and newspapers' editorial stances that are best expressed in their editorial pieces. Opinion columns are the second most important text in a newspaper regarding the ideological and critical stances on social problems. Opinion columns are written by regular writers who are experts in their fields and aligned with the editorial policy. News items are generally read for information and coverage but the editorials and columns provide detailed analysis and viewpoints on various issues. Another difference is that editorials and opinion columns are always on the same pages whereas a news story can appear on any page and in whatever style and format.

Data for analysis consisted of all editorials and opinion columns about the Hussain Khan Wala Case in Urdu newspaper daily Nawa-e-Waqt and Dawn. Hussain Khan Wala’s case was the highlight in the media in August 2015. The victims were minor and the incident grabbed the most attention of the press and public. The children were pornographically videotaped. The media discussed various aspects of the cases and political leadership's response level was also high.

**Findings and Discussion**

**Dawn**

English newspaper *Dawn* produced 03 editorials and 06 opinion columns on the Hussain Khan Wala/Kasur Case. None of the texts mentioned, "sexual abuse" in the title headlines. Instead, "child abuse" or "abuse" was used in the title headlines of editorials and opinion columns.

"Child abuse scandal" appeared on 10th August 2015. This editorial opens with the political dimension of the case and highlights the imbalance of political power among the social classes. The political aspect is made prominent by using "the political damage" and "politicization" in a single sentence. The editorial is written in narrative and descriptive style and quotes from another news report. The intensity of the case is highlighted through "national outrage", "shocking events", "anger", "denial" and "horror". Punjab government, its officials, and politicians are criticized while the "scandal" is portrayed at of national level. The public outrage is juxtaposed with the denial of the Punjab government. Provincial government and institutions are attributed with incapability and their institutional response is expected in the form of ambiguous "reforms".

This text highlights the "gross disparity" of power but this disparity is presented as the political and gender dimension of power is absent throughout the text. Nominalizations such as "national outrage", "Punjab government", "political damage" and "Kasur district" describe that the event took place in a limited geographic area on which there was a nationwide response but the provincial government is trying to save its political repute. "The terrible events" of "serial child abuse" were going on for "many years in rural Punjab". These descriptive elements imply that the crime is "horrific" because of its duration and continuity. The emphasis on "rural" is to focus attention that such abuses are not prevalent or existent in urban areas or other provinces. The
political and administrative incapacity is constructed by stating that these events "were neither a secret nor hard to unearth". This element of impersonal institutional voice projects particular routine matters of sexual abuse and the lack of punitive action because of the negligibility of a particular ruling regime. The editorial acknowledges the exposure of "very shocking events" in "the area" on July 8. This means that the newspaper had not considered it worthy of editorial attention at that time because this editorial is published with almost a delay of one month. Furthermore, the news was reported when the "villagers" protested and their "anger proved too much to ignore". This construction explicitly reveals the standards of newsworthiness and worthy victims. It means that scale of the crime matters not the nature of the crime itself. The anonymous construction of "gang" conceals the identity of the perpetrators as well as the broader sociocultural aspects of the crime. It entails that a particular group responsible for these events are criminals. Moreover, sex abuse is linked with the "extortion" of millions which indicates the political economy of the sexual abuse. The text uses "sex abuse" instead of "sexual abuse" and this discursive shift is important because of gender neutrality. A discursive distinction is made through different textual construction of gender. The word "sodomy" is used for boys and their age group is mentioned while "rape" is used for girls but their age group is not mentioned. The political and economic power imbalance is portrayed between the intimidating village and the "influential" suspects. The involvement of the police is made explicit by stating that they "acted under pressure" of local protest. The text first mentions just one village but then mentions the protests from 13 villages. The text then describes that the provincial government denied the occurrence of such events when it was known. The text then shows a low-level deontic modality (should have) and constructs the case from a legal perspective (to revisit its entire law-enforcement strategy). This construction indicates that sexual abuse is a matter of law enforcement through which the criminals should be punished. The social and political power of criminals is marginalized through the adjective "sadistic".

“Victims of abuse” appeared on 11th August 2015. Once again, this editorial is a mix of descriptive, narrative, and moral genres. Politicians, government, and society are mentioned generically without specific nominal attributions. This time, instead of "scandal", the editorial describes "child pornography", "gang of pedophiles", "sexual violation" and "films". The atmosphere of anguish is portrayed through "ghastly acts", "sensational coverage", "tales of horror" and "tragedy". Trauma, justice, power relations, and exposition are the main features of the narrative. Limited details of the nature of sexual abuse are presented and most of the text shifts attention to provincial administration and politicians.

In a neutral tone, the text describes that "horrific details" are "spilling out in the media". There is a contradiction in the description. In the first editorial, the newspaper explicitly mentions "hundreds of young boys and girls" but in this editorial, it narrates "if not hundreds". Several other shifts in the discursive nominalization are also significant. Now the "suspects" have become "perpetrators" and the "sadistic gang" becomes "a gang of pedophiles". Sex abuse, sodomy, and rape are now constructed as "sexual violations". There is no hint of violence. The victims are portrayed as young instead of children. Again, there is confusion about the attitude and response of the villagers and victims' families. Previously, the newspaper maintained that the entire village was aware of this but was intimidated, then it maintained that the villagers were threatened and now it maintains that the villagers were blackmailed and extorted. The discourse now blames the Punjab administration instead of the Punjab government for denial and downplay. A high-level epistemic modality (must be) is used for the administration's accountability and punishment for the perpetrators.

The last editorial of Dawn’s “Lest we forget” appeared on 24th August 2015. The horror genre dominates the editorial. The words "ghastliest of tragedies", "child sexual abuse horror", "monstrous crime", "humiliation", "intimidation", "outrage" and "shock" construct a discourse of
trauma. This time, the number of sexually abused children is stated that is "almost 300". Victims have sympathized and justice for victims is demanded from the administration. The aspect of power is absent but the influence is implicitly mentioned indicating "collusion with criminals". Contrary to the negative effects of the "glare of media" on the victims, this editorial emphasizes the importance of media reminders of this "monstrous crime". This contradictory discursive construction reveals the dilemma of media coverage.

“Shame, guilt and child abuse” was published on 12th August 2015 by Rafia Zakaria. She constructs several discourses in her text that goes beyond the legal and political frameworks. Contrary to the editorials, the writer claims that pedophiles were "busted upon the complaint of some aggrieved parents". The nominal "aggrieved" specifies the effect on the parents alone and leaves behind the outrage of villagers. The quantifier "some" indicates that not all the parents were deterred by the "influential" criminals, as the editorials maintained. The scale of the phenomenon is also shown to be spread across villages instead of a single village. Instead of "young", the writer uses "children" to indicate child sexual abuse with the essential element of "force". The writer then constructs the "compliance" of the victims through blackmauling and contextualizes that this is a societal problem faced by the "weakest and more vulnerable". This discourse of visible morality questions social moral standards and contests the social praxis with explicit gender categories. This discursive construction of visible morality has liberal and secular undercurrents but at the same time questions the gender relations of power and hollow religiosity of Pakistani society. The text intends to say that a person offering regular prayers is not necessarily a pious man. The word "seen" is of crucial discursive importance in this textual strategy. It entails that the person is just visible without any imposition or obligation. Discursively, this also entails that piety is not necessarily attached to women, that is, men are also required to be pious in this society.

“Reflections on freedom day” is written by I. A. Rehman and published on August 13th, 2015. This article highlights the sexual abuse of children as an indicator of state failure. The state failure is discussed by several failures including failure to accept the abuses, failure to comply with children's rights, to limit child abuse as a crime, and failure of intelligence agencies. The article explains these points one by one.

“The guilt of Kasur” was published on August 14th, 2015 by Asha'ar Rehman. The text describes rejection and denial but this is attributed to "us" in a conversational genre. Children's "vulnerability" and sexual abuse are too common but "we" hide these realities. The text mentions political authorities without names and particular identities who are suspects in rape cases. This highlights the routine of sexual abuse in Pakistani society. Here again, the case is denied on the ground that it is "exaggerated". This writer tells that 400 hundred children were sexually abused and video-taped which brought "shame" to the families but society is in habit of "putting off" such cases. Once again, the discourse of silence and denial is invoked. This discourse calls for a detailed "investigation" of this "ugly story" but no particular measure is suggested.

“Combating abuse” was written by Bina Shah on 16 August 2015. This text describes the scale, causes, and preventive measures of child sexual abuse in Pakistan. Without any qualifier, the writer describes "a gang of men sexually assaulted several children" and sold their videos and now there is an "emotional" demand for hanging the perpetrators. There is a notable discursive transition in this construction. The text mentions that it was the gang of "men". It also mentions "sexual assault" which is almost omitted in preceding texts under the generic child abuse. But the text adds the quantifier "several" instead of hundreds or thousands or any definite number. This may indicate that the number is possible in tens. The "gang" without any attribution to the commercial aspect of selling videos "to other pedophiles" indicates that this was a gang of pedophiles. There is no mention of rape and all other aspects are omitted in the discursive
foreground of the political economy of pornography. The writer then quotes "a BBC report" and maintains that "child abuse" is "incredibly hard to eliminate". Child sexual abuse is so common in Pakistan that it is almost reported daily in media which "means there is no deterrence" for the abusers. This combines the discourses of the prevalence of child sexual abuse and the lack of punitive measures.

"Vulnerable in court" was written by Amber Darr on 1st September 2015. By this time, the dust is settled down and the media have moved to other stories. This text does not reiterate the details and particulars of the case that happened just 20 days ago. The text briefly mentions "organized child abuse" that "sparked intense moral outrage" in which some demanded, "death to the perpetrators". This construction avoids mentioning "gang" or the gender of the generic perpetrators and the word "organized" is attributed to the crime, not the criminals. Moral outrage appears counter-discourse to the discourse of "lack of moral vocabulary" projected in a preceding text. The generic "child" also hides the gender of the victims and "some" entails that the death penalty is preferred by the writer. The discourse is shifted to the post-case situation and the vulnerability of the victims in legal trials is discussed. The writer selects an example of child sexual abuse from England. In this case, the text specifically uses loaded words "gangs of Muslim men" that reveal both the religion and gender of the criminals as well as their organized grouping of them. By appreciating the legal reforms and amendments in the British criminal system to protect the witnesses and the victims the writer compares this with the Pakistani legal system.

The last opinion column “Lessons from Kasur” is written by Rafia Zakaria on 30th September 2015. This text is an interdiscursive mix of pornography, shame, sex education, legislation, child sexual abuse, and social dynamics of child sexual abuse discourses. The first half of the text describes the traumatic and terrific situation of the survivors and the second half explains the scale and nature of the phenomenon and protective measures for parents. This is the single text in the collection of Dawn's texts that introduces the voice of the victims: "death is a better option". This brief voice is then discursively explained and an attempt is made to educate the readers. The survivors are in "hundreds" who were "tortured and filmed while performing sexual acts". This is a clear indication of horror child porn but the text is punctuated with the characterization of the survivors and the situation of Pakistani children. The discourse omits any reference to girl victims, either among the abused or among the survivors. This blackout is embedded in the culture of stigma and shame that the writer vehemently criticizes but then ultimately conforms to it.

Daily Nawa-e-Waqt
Daily Nawa-e-Waqt produced four editorials about Kasur Case but only one editorial presents a detailed opinion. The first editorial appeared on August 09, 2015, in which the newspaper revealed that 284 children were sexually abused in the village of Kasur. The editorial mentions "a village" of Kasur and does not provide the name of the village. This anonymity is maintained in all four editorials. The newspaper politicized the event by declaring it a "challenge for government's governance" and demanded exemplary punishments for the accused. The event is constructed as a case of civil strife in which residents are "agitated" while the local administration is suppressing the incident in the name of national interest. This is the only newspaper that provides background details of the perpetrators.

Daily Nawa-e-Waqt produced five opinion columns on the Kasur case out of which only three were relevant to the study. Qayyum Nizami produced a monody mixed with railways record. This shows that the case is not so serious therefore it is suitable to discuss it along with railways. First of all, Nizami boasts that this newspaper group first broke the news of this scandal. This
reveals the breaking news trend of the press in which every news channel tries to inform the readers before other news channels for the sake of rating. The text opens with the wording that "unfortunate children" were subjected to brutality. This may entail that sexual abuse was the fate of these children. It is argued that the report "terrorized" the nation. The report revealed a gang of "human-faced beasts" involved in child sexual abuse. The strategic world of "terror" is used to rejoice in the intensity of the report. This sensationalism is celebrated and a discourse of horror is introduced.

The second opinion column is written on August 16, 2015, by Naeem Qasim. This article also celebrates that this news of child abuse was first issued by a sister publication of this newspaper. There is a sense of pride in this statement that indicates the race of rating. The writer applauds the efficiency of the newspaper staff and the owner of the newspaper. This news story is constructed as the breakthrough in Pakistan's journalism history, an unprecedented example that exposed for the first time an issue that is directly related to a real social problem. This statement is a confession from the press and it means that the Pakistani press is dominated by non-issues to the extent that any coverage of a social issue is marked with distinction and celebration.

The final relevant opinion article on the Kasur case is written by Muteeullah Jan on August 17, 2015. This text mocks the political response to the incident. The text explicitly questions the political wisdom, political responsibility, and efficiency of law enforcement agencies. Jan emphasizes the silence of affected families. According to discourse, this silence is the result of the hypocrisy of the judicial system and helplessness in society in such cases. This construction simultaneously challenges the judicial system, power relations, and gender ideologies that reinforce certain taboos.

Conclusion
The texts of editorials and opinion columns in Dawn reflect social practices as well as construct or deconstruct gender ideologies and power relations existing in society. Editorials of Dawn have constructed the Kasur case of child sexual abuse in a political context and have argued that the imbalance of political power impedes the weak and vulnerable not only from raising voices but also to seek justice. In the opinion columns of Dawn, child rape is constructed to challenge the existing ideologies of sexuality and gender emphasizing forced sexual relations. Moral ideology is criticized for contesting the notions of piety, virtue, modesty, and shame.

Social practices reflected and reinforced in the texts of daily Nawa-e-Waqt are similar to those of Dawn. Child sexual abuse is discussed dominantly in the light of the criminal perspective and the porn industry is highlighted in the texts. The texts of Nawa-e-Waqt are unanimous on the nature of punishment for the criminals of sexual abuse. These texts are aligned with the establishment through their proposals of trying the criminals in anti-terrorism courts. The number of criminals and victims is undecided and varies from 5 to 25 and 270 to 284 respectively. The judicial and political system is distrusted as this system appears to be reinforcing the unequal social and gender power relations in Pakistan. The moral fabric is disrupted and society no authority can control society. Religious and political leaders are themselves involved in social and sexual abuses.

References


