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Discourses of beauty: An ideological apparatus of women marginalization in Pakistani literature

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Abstract - The present research aims at deconstructing the ideals of beauty in English literature produced by Pakistani women. It also focuses on demystifying the discursive structures which define a set of normative standards of beauty in a patriarchal society like Pakistan. The study is based on a corpus of twenty novels authored by women. The metaphor of beauty has been demystified by employing FCDA. This research attempts to understand the ways women view the image of female beauty as compared to the perspective of men on female beauty. The research found Adjective-phrase as one of the most constitutive parts of Discourse of beauty. It found that the adjectives like gorgeous, pretty, delicate, elegant, attractive were most frequently associated with the image of woman to constitute her as beauty being. Several discursive strategies in this regard have been employed by both counterparts to maintain the Status quo of societal power in Pakistani patriarchal society. This conceptualization of beauty is so pervasively disseminated in the minds of women that they feel proud of being admired and appreciated by their counterpart. The study also highlights that women are taken as beauty being, a thing, a toy or an instrument to be enjoyed. No doubt, women's beauty in men's discourses equates to their physical appearance and sexual object. The same tendency has been highlighted in women discourses which as well reflect that the women are aware of male gaze regarding feminine beauty. The concept of beauty is strictly associated only with women and considered as an inherent trait of an acceptable woman in the society. The phenomenon reiterates the historical and traditional concept of beauty attached only to women. This concept of passivation contributes to women's continued marginalization as inactive beings of society.

Keywords: beauty standards; female body objectification; feminist critique; patriarchy literature; women marginalization

1. Introduction

Language does not serve just being a neutral means of communication but as a discursive and strategic tool in the construction of identities. Power is closely tied to it, allowing ideological

motivations to be constructed, reinforced, and normalized (Fairclough, 1995). When language operates as a structured system of statements that construct meanings, it takes the form of discourse. Discourse shapes and is shaped dialogically by the social relations of power, as Foucault (1972) highlights. Discourse thus becomes a crucial tool in creating and maintaining hierarchical structures by validating some knowledge systems while marginalizing or rejecting others.

From a gendered standpoint, discourse is essential to the formation of identities, stereotypes, and the perpetuation of inequalities. According to feminist studies, gender is a social construct that is created, preserved, and controlled through discourse rather than a pre-discursive reality based on biology (Butler, 1990; Lazar, 2005). Sunderland (2004) emphasizes on the same point and argues that institutional narratives, media portrayals, and casual conversation all contribute to the power of gender discourses. Butler (1990) states gender as performative, which holds that gender is not a fixed nature but rather is enacted through cultural cues, language practices, and repetitive acts. They are discursively constructed performances that eventually become accepted as self-evident facts but are maintained by discourses that are loaded with power. Thus, by portraying masculinity and femininity as normative, dominant gender discourses create and maintain the binary. Such discourses are crucial for perpetuating the ideas that govern social hierarchies, as noted by van Dijk (1998).

In this way, discourse reveals the intricate relationship between language, power, and ideology by actively producing gendered realities rather than only reflecting them. Through gender discourses, patriarchal values are normalized and passed down through the generations, guaranteeing the perpetuation of inequality under the guise of cultural "norms."

The interaction between language, discourse, power, and ideology seems significant to study in Pakistani society. As a patriarchal culture influenced by religious, cultural, and traditional systems, the society observes discursive practices that limit women to the notions of beauty, chastity, and domesticity while prioritizing male authority and public prominence (Shaheed, 2010; Weiss, 1999). It both reflects and contradicts the prevailing narratives, English-language literature written by Pakistani authors—especially women—offers an important platform for analyzing these processes. Women are frequently reduced to "beauty beings" in Pakistani gender discourse, a term that conflates their aesthetic value and social standing with outward appearance. When we look at the discursive construction of beauty in Pakistani literature, we see how linguistic devices like narrative framing, metaphors, and adjectives serve as ideological instruments to maintain women's oppression. Women's own writings, however, make this process more difficult because they both indicate complicity with and opposition to patriarchal narratives. Thus, language, discourse, power, and ideology work together to create, perpetuate, and sometimes question gendered subjectivities in Pakistani literature, making it a disputed space.

The present study in this backdrop intends to investigate the ideals of beauty in English literature produced by Pakistani women. Additionally, it aims to deconstruct the discursive mechanisms that, in a patriarchal country like Pakistan, define a set of normative criteria of beauty. A corpus of twenty books written by women served as the study's foundation. By using FCDA, the metaphor of beauty has been made more understandable. The goal of this study is to compare how men and women see feminine attractiveness in order to better understand how women perceive it. One of the most important components of the discourse of beauty, according to the research, is the adjective phrase. The study discovered that the most commonly used adjectives to describe women as beautiful beings were gorgeous, pretty, delicate, elegant, attractive. Both parties have used a number of discursive techniques in this area to uphold the status quo of social dominance in Pakistani patriarchal society.

Women feel happy of being adored and valued by their counterparts since this conception of beauty is so widely ingrained in their brains. The study also emphasizes how women are viewed as objects, toys, or instruments to be enjoyed, rather than as beautiful beings. Women's physical attributes and sexual objectivity are unquestionably equated with their beauty in men's discourses. Women's discourses have also emphasized this tendency, indicating that

women are conscious of men's perceptions of female beauty. Only women are tightly associated with the concept of beauty, which is regarded as an innate quality of a socially acceptable woman. The issue perpetuates the traditional and historical notion of beauty that is exclusively associated with women. Women's persistent marginalization as passive members of society is facilitated by this idea of passivization.

Gender identities are shaped and maintained by language and discourse, which incorporate cultural norms and expectations into communication. Talking about, narrating, or symbolizing gender creates connotations that extend beyond personal expression and frame how society views masculinity and femininity. Gender representation in literature, where these identities are both reflected and contested, can be examined using this discursive construction as a basis.

Literary representations of, and resistance to, gender roles have long been a focus of feminist studies. Gender, according to Butler (1990), is a performative construct that is shaped by cultural practices and repeated acts rather than being based on biology. In literary texts, this performativity frequently manifests as the persistent representation of women as delicate, decorative, and beautiful. According to Sunderland (2004), gendered discourses in language often reproduce traditional dichotomies of masculinity and femininity by positioning women as aesthetic objects. By presenting gendered differences as natural, these recurring representations not only influence cultural norms but also normalize them.

Women's objectification has been extensively documented in literature and the media. Women are culturally positioned as bodies to be examined and assessed, according to the well-known objectification hypothesis of Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). This leads to body monitoring, discontent, and a diminished feeling of self-worth. Numerous cultural contexts have seen the use of this theoretical paradigm. According to studies, beauty standards that prioritize fairness, slimness, and fashion as crucial components of femininity continue to be prevalent in South Asia (Khan, 2018). Similar results may be found in Iranian literary traditions, where women are primarily identified by their beauty, style, and fashion, while men are typically portrayed as possessing qualities of strength, power, and intelligence (Shirazi, 2015). These gendered discourses serve to uphold a cultural logic that prioritizes women's physical attributes over their agency or intellectual contributions.

As a reflection of its larger cultural context, Pakistani literature still emphasizes beauty as a quality that distinguishes women. Well-known literary works serve as examples of this trend: Sidhwa's (1991) *Cracking India*, Durrani's (1994) *My Feudal Lord*, and Mohsin's (2007) *Broken Verses* all emphasize women's physical beauty while frequently downplaying their moral or intellectual complexity. Similar to what Foucault (1972) referred to as "discursive formations" – structured methods of meaning-making that influence cultural perception and uphold preexisting power relations – these narratives, even when written by women authors, are nevertheless rooted in discursive traditions that value beauty.

Beauty standards are deeply ingrained in popular culture and the media, not only in literature. According to recent research, women are frequently portrayed as beauty objects in Pakistani television ads and commercials, which strengthens the link between femininity and physical attractiveness (Khan, 2020). The extent to which aestheticized depictions of women are socially and culturally produced is shown by this discursive continuity between literary representation and media picture.

Discourses of beauty in Pakistani literature function as an ideological apparatus that marginalizes women by reinforcing patriarchal norms and controlling female identity through cultural expectations. Literary works such as Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* and Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord* depict women's bodies as battlegrounds where male control manifests physically, sexually, and emotionally, symbolizing broader societal domination and the reduction of women to objects of male honour (Nazeer & Anees, 2025; Sachdev, 2020). Advertisements and media further perpetuate idealized beauty standards that restrict women's roles and reinforce their marginalization by promoting narrow, often unattainable images of

femininity designed to influence consumer behaviour and social perceptions (Qayyum & Ali, 2024).

Contemporary Pakistani fiction, including Feryal Ali Gauhar's *An Abundance of Wild Roses*, highlights the intersection of female marginalization with issues like misogyny, gender-based violence, and cultural stereotypes, revealing the harsh realities faced by women in patriarchal society (Saleem et al., 2025).

Feminist critiques also emphasize how women's voices in Urdu poetry and public discourse have historically been silenced or constrained, with recent literary efforts striving to reclaim female agency against socio-cultural taboos (Nasir, 202; Zaib et al., 2025). Overall, these discourses reveal a persistent struggle where beauty ideals serve not only as aesthetic norms but also as mechanisms for sustaining gender inequality and limiting women's autonomy in Pakistan (Nazeer & Anees, 2025; Qayyum & Ali, 2024; Maknun et al., 2023).

The scholarly discourse on Pakistani women's literature reveals a rich tapestry of feminist exploration, cultural negotiation, and postcolonial resistance. Recent research demonstrates how Pakistani women writers navigate complex intersections of gender, tradition, and modernity within their literary works.

Bint-E-Khalil and Ali (2025) illuminate the profound connections between cultural ideals and women's embodied experiences in Azad Jammu & Kashmir, revealing how beauty standards and nutrition practices reflect deeper societal expectations. This corporeal dimension of women's lives finds literary expression through what Mujahid (2023) identifies as critical portrayals of gender roles in Pakistani literature, where writers challenge traditional paradigms while remaining embedded within cultural contexts.

The feminist critical discourse extends beyond thematic content to structural marginalization. Ilyas (2025) exposes how women's voices are systematically sidelined in public discourse through Pakistani talk shows, a pattern that mirrors the literary marginalization examined by Siraj, Anjum, and Samad (2021) in their analysis of Mohammed Hanif's "Our Lady of Alice Bhatti." These scholars trace how female characters embody broader societal oppression, their stories serving as allegories for Pakistani women's struggles.

Theoretical frameworks reveal intriguing tensions within Pakistani feminist literature. Abdullah and Awan (2017) explore Islamic postfeminism and Muslim chick-lit, demonstrating how seemingly conflicting discourses coexist within contemporary narratives. This complexity extends to pedagogical spaces, where Niazi, Naz, and Akhtar (2025) examine how Pakistani women writers and feminist themes are taught in educational settings.

Notably, Bibi and Doering (2024) identify significant absences—the missing themes of manhood and childhood in Pakistani women's writing compared to American counterparts—suggesting deliberate narrative choices that prioritize women's autonomous experiences. Mansoor and Malik (2020) advocate for decolonial-posthuman pedagogy to reconceptualize "womanness" beyond colonial frameworks, while Safdar, Abbas, and Zafar (2022) demonstrate through Bapsi Sidhwa's "The Pakistani Bride" how literature amplifies oppressed voices, creating counter-narratives to patriarchal dominance.

According to previous study, women are primarily portrayed in terms of attractiveness, fragility, and conformity to socially acceptable beauty standards, whereas males are frequently defined via agency, intelligence, and power across cultural and literary traditions. These representations serve as ideological instruments that uphold gender hierarchy and patriarchal ideals. Building on these observations, the current study investigates whether Pakistani female English-language writers still largely use women as objects of beauty in their works. Through an analysis of these literary discourses, the study seeks to determine the extent to which Pakistani women's writing challenges, exacerbates, or continues to support conventional conceptions of femininity and beauty.

2. Method

Twenty English-language novels authored by Pakistani women make up the corpus for this study. These novels were chosen because they offer a good representation of the literary output of Pakistani women today and because they represent an important discursive space for the construction, negotiation, and contestation of gendered identities.

Adjectives used to characterize the physical and psychological characteristics of male and female characters were the focus of the analysis. Adjectives were automatically extracted from the texts and gathered into a structured database using NLTK (Natural Language Toolkit) for tokenization and part-of-speech tagging. To ensure correctness, the automatically generated lists were cross-checked through attentive reading. Adjectives that specifically characterized appearance or personal qualities were the only ones kept. The seven semantic categories of beauty—beautiful, gorgeous, pretty, attractive, elegant, delicate, and fashionable—were then applied to these things. These categories serve as language markers that show how gendered identities are discursively constructed, and they were created inductively by spotting recurrent patterns throughout the corpus. Finding recurrent lexical patterns in the corpus allowed for the inductive development of the categorization, which was then improved by intertextual comparison.

Calculating the frequencies of these descriptors in relation to male and female characters added a comparative dimension. This made it possible to investigate empirically whether female characters are more frequently portrayed as "beauty beings" than their male counterparts, who are typically portrayed in classic patriarchal discourses as possessing strength, intelligence, or agency.

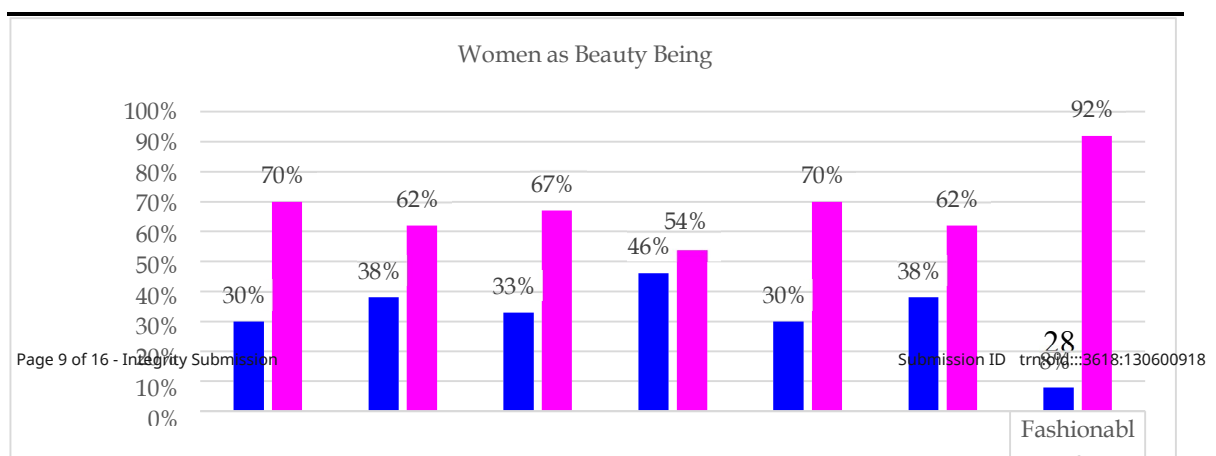
Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which looks at how language use perpetuates gender ideology and power disparities, serves as the analytical framework (Lazar, 2005). In order to comprehend why some adjectives are used often, how they create femininity in relation to masculinity, and what ideological purposes they serve in the Pakistani sociocultural context, the study employs a critical interpretive lens in addition to quantitative counts. According to FCDA, the approach views language as a constitutive practice that reinforces patriarchal standards by elevating particular discourses of beauty while excluding alternative portrayals of women, rather than as a neutral reflection of reality.

Therefore, the methodology combines critical discourse interpretation with lexical analysis, guaranteeing that the study not only maps the linguistic patterns but also examines their ideological implications in the creation and maintenance of gendered subjectivities in Pakistani literature.

3. Results and Discussion

It is known fact that women have historically been portrayed as objects of beauty in popular literature, particularly works written by men, and this has been the standard in the relevant society. Understanding how a lady became a beautiful object in her own words is a complex phenomenon in this instance. It becomes very crucial to comprehend how closely this image resembles the conventional representation of a beautiful lady that was previously produced by males in their writing. The most frequently used adjectives with male and female for picture formation in the corpus are listed in table below. This discussion of beauty is based on seven semantic notions that, in some way, have a common aesthetic foundation throughout society.

The discursive representations that ultimately lead to the discourse of women as beautiful beings are discussed in the following pages.



	Beautiful	Gorgeous	Pretty	Attractive	Elegant	Delicate
Male %	30%	38%	33%	46%	30%	38%
Female %	70%	62%	67%	54%	70%	62%
			Male %	Female %		

Women as Beauty Being

This table illustrates how Women devastatingly dominate the beauty discourse, with 70% of *beautiful* and 92% of *fashionable* usages. Men are occasionally described as *attractive* or *delicate*, but often with different connotations (e.g., *delicate* implying weakness in men vs. tenderness in women). Female authors, despite writing from women's perspectives, persistently replicate traditional representations of beauty, as seen in excerpts like Durrani's (1994) description of her youthful self as a "pretty young lady". In English literature, women are more often portrayed as lovely and alluring characters than men. It shows how the usage of modifying adjectives varies noticeably across the social participants (men and women) in the corpus and advances the language of beauty.

The notion of beauty as a salient characteristic of women saturates the corpus of texts, ultimately contributing to the development of gender discourse. Several passages taken from the corpus demonstrate the discursive dominance of women as beauty beings.

"Every feature of her face was delicate and beautiful but spectacles gave her a nerdy look" (Naveed, 2014, p. 24). In this instance, attractiveness frames the female character's whole identity. In regard to her looks, even something as neutral as spectacles is interpreted.

"Mustafa was married to a beautiful woman who appeared to be devoted to him" (Durrani, 1994, p. 39). The wife is introduced purely on the basis of her appearance, not her character, abilities, or knowledge.

"My mother was a beautiful woman before she turned into a heartless haridan" (Minhas, 2007, p. 115). The mother's physical appearance is the first factor that determines the value of her character; her eventual flaws are contrasted with that beauty. "Heer was the most beautiful girl in all of Punjab" (Mohsin, 2007, p. 15). The identity of heroine is diminished to her status as the "most beautiful," which serves as her main indicator of importance.

These examples show how beauty is viewed as a woman's primary quality, frequently taking precedence over inner traits like morality, intellect, or skill. In Pakistani and other cultures, women's social value is normally determined by their looks. This is a reflection of deeply ingrained cultural standards.

Another example "she was so beautiful that I don't think he cared what language she spoke or didn't speak" (Haji, 2009, p. 67) demonstrates how attractiveness is valued more than traits like communication, education, or cultural fit, even in private or family conversations. In this instance, the man is only interested in her appearance and not in her personality or language skills.

This type of recurrent portrayals are part of what Butler (1990) refers to as the performative construction of gender, whereby women are trained through literature and culture that their most significant "performance" is beauty.

Foucault's (1972) idea of discourse as a power mechanism is also relevant in this context: the discourse of beauty tries to control women's social roles by limiting their identities to physical attributes.

According to feminist criticism, this is also connected to the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975), which portrays women as things to be gazed at, appreciated, or owned.

The findings clearly favour the discourse of women as objects of beauty, with 70% of beauty-related descriptors given to female characters and 30% to male characters. This stark discrepancy emphasizes how women are disproportionately portrayed through aesthetic qualities in literary discourse, which constructs identity in gendered manner. Historically, works by male Pakistani authors were particularly notable for this kind of portrayal. Prior research conducted in Pakistan has also highlighted the objectification of women as representations of beauty, a trend that is consistent with cross-cultural literary traditions and genres. For the perpetuation of traditional gender norms, these images serve to maintain long-standing beliefs. This is where the current study's findings closely align with previous research, showing that semantically related words like gorgeous, attractive, pretty, and delicate continue to sustain the discourse of beauty.

The term gorgeous strengthens the discourse of women as beauty objects by building on the earlier descriptor beautiful, which became the most commonly used adjective for women in the corpus. While 70% of female characterizations were beautiful, 62% of female characterizations were gorgeous, compared to 38% for male counterparts. This distribution draws attention to a persistent tendency in women's depiction to prioritize aesthetic attributes. For example, the description "*She looked utterly gorgeous in crimson chiffon saree. She had tied up her hair in a tight ponytail and bright red lipstick looked sensational on her lips*" (Naveed, 2014, p. 179) frames the female character's identity entirely in terms of visual appeal. Another example "*She was born, a gorgeous baby girl we brought her home from the hospital in a light pink dress with white daisies embroidered on it*" (Zuberi, 2012, p. 32) further illustrates how this aesthetic labeling starts at birth, ingraining beauty into the fundamental fabric of female identity. The use of gorgeous, in addition to beautiful, is a prime example of how women's portrayal in women-authored Pakistani literature in English is consistently rooted in outward appearance, thus sustaining a long-standing and culturally embedded discourse of femininity as aesthetic objecthood. These qualities undoubtedly characterize a woman's physical characteristics, which align with the conventional definition of beauty found in male-produced literature as well.

Pretty is another important component of the discourse on beauty, following the beautiful and gorgeous descriptors, which emphasize women's outward appearance as their major identity marker. Pretty is a clearly feminized descriptor in the corpus, appearing 67% of the time in relation to female characters and 33% to the male characters. For instance, the line "*I turn around and go back into Soraya's room. She looks so pretty*" (Khan, 2009, p. 161) illustrates how beauty is once again centered as the most prominent attribute of the female character. Similarly, the remarks "*Hey, look at that girl. She looks pretty. One of the men from the table commented*" (Naveed, 2014, p. 116), "*Her son had an eye for pretty girls*" (Sidhwa, 1991, p. 161), and "*Now one of you pretty sisters want to hug me first?*" (Kamal, 2019, p. 139) all validate how women are consistently evaluated through their physical attractiveness in both social and familial contexts.

It is significant to note that this attribution is not limited to the viewpoints of men. The extract "*A petite, still pretty woman in her early forties, her delicacy belied her strength. It was that delicacy, that apparent frailty, that had led my mother to shortlist her as a potential bride for her younger brother*" (Minhas, 2007, p. 21) reveals how even women themselves often prioritize beauty when evaluating other women. These examples reveal how cultural norms about femininity are internalized. Additionally, some female writers use this aesthetic lens to reflect on their own identities. For example, Durrani (1994) states: "*By the time I was sixteen, nature had allowed me to evolve into a pretty young lady*" (p. 14), representing that growing attractive denotes entering maturity rather than intellectual or personal development. Thus, the word pretty, in addition to beautiful and gorgeous, reinforces the idea that women are objects of beauty. The extent to which this idealized portrayal of women has become ingrained and accepted in Pakistani English writing is demonstrated by its extensive use in both male and female viewpoints.

Another important discursive image linked with women is the adjective attractive, which extends the series of descriptors beautiful, gorgeous, and pretty. In the corpus, the term

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"attractive" was used 54% of the time for female characters and 46% of the time for male characters. Even though the distribution is a little more evenly distributed than with other descriptors, women continue to be the main focus of this aesthetic designation. Examples such as *"She had an attractive and a slim face. Every feature of her face was delicate and beautiful"* (Naveed, 2014, p. 21) and *"She is also very attractive anyone who can't see that should get their eyes examined"* (Kamal, 2019, p. 95) emphasize physical beauty as a characteristic that distinguishes women. This reinforces the idea of women as a beauty object by placing exterior attractiveness over interior attributes like intelligence, competence, or moral character. But unlike beautiful or pretty, the adjective attractive can sometimes allow for a more complex representation. For instance, Minhas (2007) observes: *"There were women as attractive, even prettier, but it was the way she held herself. Her confidence made her stand out in any crowd"*. (p. 137)

Here, attractiveness is associated with composure and confidence in addition to physical attributes, indicating a possible shift away from exclusively aesthetic framing. However, because appearance is still valued by the prevailing association, these cases continue to be exceptions. It's interesting to note that some female writers also use the term "attractive" for male characters. The statement *"It was only logical that competition for attractive men was fierce"* appears in Minhas's (2007) novel. The extract *"We were supposed to be trained from birth to strive for the impossible"* (p. 185) illustrates how appearance does not only reduce men to aesthetic value but also suggests desirability in the context of competition. In contrast to women, whose representations are consistently aestheticized, males are sometimes regarded as attractive, but their wider literary representation is still linked to attributes of aptitude and agency. Therefore, the term "attractive" contributes to the wider discursive construction of women as beauty objects, even though it is somewhat more fairly distributed between genders than "beautiful" or "pretty." Its use perpetuates the cultural link between physical attractiveness and femininity, which has historically been more ingrained in depictions of women than of males.

In continuation of the descriptors beautiful, gorgeous, pretty, and attractive, the terms delicate and elegant also appear as important discursive constituents in the creation of women's identities within the corpus. With delicate occurring 62% of the time and elegant 70% of the time, both are primarily linked to female characters. A little more nuanced picture of femininity is presented by these descriptions, which emphasize physical appearance and fragility as key characteristics of women while simultaneously suggesting elegance and refinement. For example, the extract *"the woman's cell phone rang and the girl watched as she picked it up with her delicate, fair hands and started speaking in English"* (Javeri, 2019, p. 31) highlights the fragility of hands, reducing the character's significance to aesthetic and bodily qualities. Similarly, *"she had an attractive and a slim face. Every feature of her face was delicate and beautiful"* (Naveed, 2014, p. 21) links delicacy directly to beauty, emphasizing tenderness as a valued trait in women. Delicate takes on a whole distinct meaning when used to describe masculine personalities, which is significant: *"Hakim Dilbar was a delicate man." He is so fragile that there is no other way to put it* (Javeri, 2019, p. 88). This illustrates how the same term has gendered connotations formed by cultural past, as delicacy here does not indicate allure but fragility. In a same vein, Bhutto (2015) uses the phrase in the description, *"She holds another pencil in her fingers and speaks in a delicate monotone"* (p. 69), which highlights a feminine relationship with sensitivity and fragility.

The adjective elegant emphasizes sophistication and refinement while creating a related but different image. In Mohsin's (2007) depiction, *"She called Rani 'Koonj', the crane, in acknowledgement of her long neck and elegant gait"* (p. 5), beauty is emphasized as the primary characteristic of women by placing elegance in body posture and grace. But the emphasis changes when the same term is used to refer to men. According to Naveed (2014), *"This gentleman was none other than Mr. Muraad Hussain, the university's trustee." In his looks, he exuded elegance and joy. During his speech, he frequently made the audience laugh, which was one of his most charming traits* (p. 8). Here, elegance goes beyond physical appearance to encompass social and intellectual charm, in contrast to its application to women. When combined, delicate and elegant support the discursive construction of femininity as being both physically frail and aesthetically refined. These characteristics place women in what Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) refer to as the "cult of

femininity," a phenomenon in which media and literature reinforce cultural norms that require women to adhere to standards of beauty and sophistication. The gender disparity in usage further illustrates how language choices perpetuate gender hierarchies by enshrining grace and fragility as fundamentally feminine traits.

Fashionable is the last and possibly most forceful adjective in the corpus. It was connected with women 92% of the time, compared to 8% for men. This glaring discrepancy highlights the tight relationship between fashion and the production of femininity in women-authored English-literature from Pakistan. In contrast to terms like "beautiful," "gorgeous," or "pretty," which emphasize inherent physical qualities, "fashionable" conveys cultural training and societal expectations, indicating how women should present, dress, and groom themselves to adhere to aesthetic standards. The corpus reveals that this quality is attached to women across different age groups and roles. For instance, in Durrani's (1994) novel, *"Mother was renowned for her fashionable soirees"* (p. 9), even the maternal figure is defined by her ability to host events marked by fashionability. Similarly, Kamal (2019) notes: *"But you're always telling the girls to be fashionable," Mr. Binat said, winking at Alys* (p. 33), which reflects the social training of girls from an early age to prioritize fashion as part of their identity. In another example, *"I didn't know your sister was so fashionable"* (Khan, 2012, p. 26), the label is used as a form of recognition and praise, reaffirming fashion as a desirable trait for women. Even though fashion may be used by both sexes, its widespread association with women highlights its function as a symbol of femininity.

Women are constantly characterized as trendy, whereas men are more frequently linked to strength, authority, or power (Shirazi, 2015). The discourse around women's clothing reflects a wider ideological construction of femininity and echoes trends seen in other cultural contexts. In Pakistan, these portrayals are consistent with prevailing beauty norms that are promoted by the media and popular culture and value long hair, a pale complexion, a trim build, and fashionable attire. These social influences are an example of what Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) called the "cult of femininity," in which women's value is based on their conformity to beauty and aesthetic standards. Women's symbolic and actual access to strategic, economic, and political arenas is restricted by this ongoing identification of women with fashion and physical attractiveness, which serves as a hidden exclusionary mechanism. The comparatively low level of aesthetic focus in the portrayal of males, on the other hand, highlights their persistent relationship with power and agency, normalizing their supremacy in all spheres of social life.

In this regard, fashionable serves as the apex of the corpus's discourse on beauty. Beautiful, gorgeous, pretty, attractive, delicate, and elegant are descriptions that emphasize physical attributes and refinement; nevertheless, fashionable refers to the social conditioning of women to actively preserve and exhibit these attributes. Its overwhelming prevalence reflects a wider cultural assumption that women must always focus on looks to embody beauty, in addition to a literary trend.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate a clear dominance of the discourse of beauty in the representation of women in Pakistani English literature. Across the corpus, descriptors such as *beautiful, gorgeous, pretty, attractive, delicate, elegant, and fashionable* were disproportionately associated with female characters, while male characters received merely a passing aesthetic description. This imbalance reveals how beauty has been discursively constructed as a defining feature of femininity, while men's identities remain largely associated with traits of agency, intellect, or strength. The analysis shows that women have been subjected to a systematic reduction under the guise of femininity, limited within the discursive parameters of grace and beauty. Men do not avoid aestheticization, but they are the ones who enforce it: the patriarchal system uses the aesthetic language to objectify women and keep them in subservience. Discourse of beauty reveals cultural mechanism which minimizes women's involvement in economic, political, and intellectual paradigms in addition to the aesthetic sphere. The persistent representation of women as artistic subjects is an ideological strategy that diverts attention from their potential as active social, political, and economic agents in order to uphold male dominance and legitimize patriarchal power relations.

The adjective *beautiful* emerged as the most frequent descriptor for women (70%), establishing beauty as their primary identity marker. As the examples illustrate, female characters were consistently introduced or remembered through their beauty — a strategy of objectification through language that reinforces the notion that a woman's social worth is tied to appearance. Similarly, *gorgeous* (62%) further emphasizes the aestheticization of women, extending even to newborn girls, thereby inscribing beauty into female identity from birth. The adjective *pretty* (67%), marked by its colloquial and everyday use, reflects repetition and normalization, signaling how beauty becomes an expected and internalized performance of femininity (Butler, 1990).

The descriptor *attractive* (54%) reinforces the privileging of physical appeal, with only rare instances linking it to composure or confidence. Even when applied to men, attractiveness carries competitive or desirability-based connotations rather than reducing them to appearance, underscoring **hierarchical contrast construction**. Likewise, *delicate* (62%) embodies a **double standard**: celebrated as grace and tenderness in women but dismissed as weakness in men, sustaining hegemonic femininity and masculinity (Connell, 1995). *Elegant* (70%) situates women within what Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) term the "cult of femininity," where refinement and composure are expected, while for men it expands to charisma and intellect — again demonstrating asymmetry.

The most striking finding is *fashionable*, applied to women in 92% of occurrences. Unlike the naturalizing descriptors, fashionable represents a **regulation through social desirability**, tying femininity to cultural training and conformity with societal norms of dress (Foucault, 1972). Its prevalence across age groups illustrates how fashion becomes a ubiquitous expectation, reiterating Shirazi's (2015) finding that women in South Asian cultures are always advocating for beauty standards.

Equally significant is what is absent: **exclusion and erasure** mark the discourse, with women rarely described in terms of intellect, professional competence, or agency, and men seldom portrayed as tender, emotional, or aesthetically valued without stigma. Resistant identities — such as women rejecting beauty norms or men embodying alternative masculinities — remain largely invisible. This selective representation sustains patriarchal hierarchies by constraining the range of thinkable subjectivities.

Taken together, these discourse strategies demonstrate that beauty adjectives are not neutral but ideological: they aestheticize women, reproduce the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), naturalize the performative link between femininity and appearance (Butler, 1990), enforce regulation through discourse (Foucault, 1972), and sustain internalized beauty standards (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Ultimately, the literary language of beauty entrenches unequal gender hierarchies, positioning women as passive aesthetic objects while maintaining men as active social agents.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the discourse of beauty operates as a dominant and persistent mode of representing women in discursive societal structures of Pakistani. The systematic analysis of descriptors such as *beautiful*, *gorgeous*, *pretty*, *attractive*, *delicate*, *elegant*, and *fashionable* shows that female characters are overwhelmingly defined through aesthetic attributes — a strategy of objectification through language — in contrast, these phrases are used sparingly to describe male characters.

Even when applied to men, aesthetic descriptors acquire distinct connotations, extending to charisma, authority, or social presence, while women's identities remain narrowly bound to attractiveness, refinement, and social desirability. This asymmetry reflects **hierarchical contrast construction**, positioning men as active agents and women as passive aesthetic objects.

The findings further reveal how double standards, repetition and normalization, and regulation through social desirability sustain hegemonic femininity and masculinity (Connell, 1995). The persistence of these descriptors, even in works authored by women, signals the

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internalization of patriarchal expectations and the silencing of resistant identities — a process of **exclusion and erasure** that forecloses alternative subjectivities for both women and men. The fact that female authors also reproduce these patterns indicates the internalization of patriarchal expectations and the pervasiveness of beauty as a cultural marker of womanhood. These patterns correspond with feminist theories of performativity (Butler, 1990), discourse and power (Foucault, 1972), the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), and objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which collectively explain how women are discursively constructed, controlled, and subordinated through aesthetic ideals.

By demystifying the ideological function of beauty discourse, this research underscores how seemingly neutral linguistic patterns naturalize unequal gender hierarchies and reproduce patriarchal cultural logics. Future studies could extend this inquiry to other genres — poetry, drama, or digital fiction — to examine whether emerging narratives challenge or continue to perpetuate beauty-centered depictions. Such work would deepen our understanding of how literature participates in shaping, reinforcing, or potentially destabilizing the cultural construction of gender in Pakistan and beyond.

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