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Patriarchy as a Contagious Speech Act in an Urdu Film *Bol*

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Article Details

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Contagious Speech Acts, Patriarchy, Gender Discrimination, *Bol*

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The goal of this study is to explore how such speech acts, particularly as reflected in the narrative of *Bol*, produce systemic oppression in Pakistan's patriarchal society. The research focuses on how speech, grounded in cultural and religious authority, functions as a mechanism of gendered control. It also investigates the moments where language resists where characters use counter speech to challenge the moral frameworks that bind them. The study is significant since, by applying Butler's theory of contagious speech acts to the selected verbal structures, the research highlights how language infects social thinking. Just as a virus spread through contact, these patriarchal expressions circulate through homes, pulpits, and state policies establishing obedience, delegitimizing resistance, and maintaining male supremacy. In this way, the study of speech becomes central to understanding how gender discrimination is not only performed but made to feel natural, moral, and unchangeable in everyday life. This study offers a strong platform for further academic inquiry into the intersections of language, gender, and power, particularly in patriarchal, religious, and postcolonial societies like Pakistan. Future studies should consider collecting data from real world sources such as interviews with women, court proceedings, or domestic conversations to enhance empirical depth.

INTRODUCTION

This qualitative study investigates how patriarchal structures in Pakistani society are linguistically maintained and challenged through contagious speech acts. By applying Judith Butler's performative speech theory presented in *Excitable Speech* (1997) to real world gender dynamics as reflected in cultural, religious, and domestic speech the research seeks to understand how repeated utterances construct, reinforce, and occasionally disrupt oppressive gender roles. Using the narrative framework of *Bol* as a contextual example, the study explores speech not as description, but as action embedded in cultural norms, religious discourse, and social expectations. This study does not treat these utterances as isolated quotes but as socio political events that carry ideological force and shape lived realities.

In patriarchal societies, language is not a neutral medium of communication it is an active tool used to construct and maintain gendered power relations. In Pakistan, where religion, tradition, and cultural values intersect, speech becomes central to enforcing gender roles, policing morality, and silencing resistance. The everyday language used in homes, sermons, schools, and courts not only reflects gender norms but also produces and sustains them. This study is situated within that discursive framework and investigates how contagious speech acts, as theorized by Judith Butler (2021), shape and normalize systemic gender oppression.

Judith Butler's work on performativity and excitable speech acts has shifted the study of language from what is said to what language does. According to Butler (1997), certain repeated utterances such as "a woman's honor is in her silence" or "a man is the guardian of the household" function not as neutral statements but as performative acts. These utterances become part of a broader cultural grammar that constructs femininity as obedience, invisibility, and vulnerability, and masculinity as command, control, and moral superiority. When such statements are repeated across generations and embedded in religious discourse, they become what Butler (2021) later termed contagious speech acts linguistic expressions that reproduce social hierarchies and gendered violence through repetition, legitimacy, and moral framing.

In Pakistani society, these contagious utterances are frequently deployed in the name of religious and cultural values. Common examples include the moralization of female behavior through words like "sharam" (shame), "izzat" (honor), and "adab" (modesty). These are not only terms of description they are instruments of discipline. When girls are told not to laugh loudly, not to speak freely, or not to question elders, they are being trained into gendered silence through culturally validated speech. This linguistic training begins in childhood and is reinforced

in family structures, schools, religious sermons, and media narratives (Asad et al., 2025).

The 2011 Pakistani film *Bol* presents a vivid case for examining how such speech acts manifest in real life situations. Although this study does not center on film theory, the narrative of *Bol* offers a sociolinguistic lens into the consequences of patriarchal language. The film's father figure disciplines his wife and children using religious phrases and cultural idioms that appear normal but carry coercive weight. These phrases reinforce the idea that resistance is dishonorable, femininity is weak, and difference such as transgender identity is unnatural. The scenes illustrate how language constructs a hierarchy where men hold unquestioned authority and any deviation invites shame, violence, or social exclusion.

Contagious speech acts also have long term psychological effects. Women and gender minorities internalize these verbal structures, shaping their sense of worth, voice, and agency. Repeated exposure to silencing expressions leads to self-censorship, anxiety, and an inability to articulate injustice (Ullah, 2025). This dynamic of linguistic harm is further intensified when resistance is met with religious condemnation or social ostracization. Thus, speech becomes not only an act of oppression but also a means of resistance where counter utterances, refusals, and redefinitions of the self, become critical to survival.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is central to the way gender is lived, perceived, and enforced. It is not merely a tool of communication but a constitutive force what we say, how we say it, and when we are permitted to speak directly shapes our identities and social positions. The theory of performative speech acts, developed by J. L. Austin (1962) and later extended by Judith Butler (2021), provides a crucial framework for analyzing how speech becomes an action with real world implications. According to this framework, speech can be categorized as locutionary (what is said), illocutionary (what is done by saying it), and perlocutionary (what is achieved by saying it). In patriarchal societies, these functions are frequently mobilized to uphold gender hierarchies and enforce submission.

In contexts where male authority is linked to religious or moral legitimacy, everyday expressions become acts of enforcement. For instance, a father's repeated commands to his daughter to dress modestly or lower her voice are not simply parental instructions they are illocutionary acts that construct gender norms and signal expected behavior. When such utterances are repeated and reinforced through collective agreement, they transform into contagious speech acts they circulate through society and shape norms, often without critical

reflection (Butler, 2021).

Butler's notion of performativity explains how gender is not a fixed identity but a continuous repetition of speech, gesture, and behavior that creates the illusion of stability. In patriarchal societies like Pakistan, where religion and custom intersect, speech becomes a key mechanism through which gender roles are assigned and controlled (Raday, 2003). As (Miller, 2010) argues, expressions such as "a girl's voice should not be loud" or "boys don't cry" are not just culturally accepted they are performative statements that inscribe expectations onto bodies and limit emotional and social mobility.

(Krifka, 2011) comments that speech acts do not exist in a vacuum. They are reinforced by institutional power structures schools that silence girls, courtrooms that interrogate victims, and mosques that elevate male authority in religious interpretation. In such environments, language becomes a technology of power that both reflects and enforces systemic inequality. Butler (2021) notes that when speech is performative, it creates reality rather than merely describing it. In this way, the gender roles that appear "natural" are actually the result of decades, even centuries, of spoken and unspoken rules that have been repeated into normativity.

Performative speech also plays a role in delegitimizing resistance. Women and gender diverse individuals who defy these norms are often labeled as immoral, rebellious, or shameful. These labels serve a dual function: they punish deviation and warn others against similar behavior. According to Fatima and Mubeen (2023), women in Pakistan who challenge traditional roles such as speaking publicly, choosing to work, or engaging in activism often report being verbally harassed, disowned, or framed as threats to family honor (Razzaq, 2022). These responses are not merely emotional they are structured acts of speech with perlocutionary consequences that enforce silence and obedience.

Importantly, performative speech can also be a site of resistance. Counter speech such as feminist slogans, courtroom testimonies, or protest statements challenges the norm by introducing new speech acts that disrupt the old ones. These acts have the potential to destabilize dominant discourses and propose alternative realities. As Butler (1997) asserts, while language can wound, it can also be reclaimed. The very structure that enables oppression can be turned against itself when the excluded begin to speak, redefine terms, and demand recognition.

In the Pakistani context, such acts of linguistic resistance are increasingly visible. Movements like the Aurat March, legal petitions against discriminatory laws, and online advocacy for transgender rights show how speech is being reclaimed as a tool for social change.

These acts reframe silence as oppression and speech as survival, thereby reasserting agency through language. As Khushbakat and Sultana (2020) note, these interventions do not just challenge laws they challenge the speech structures that make such laws feel morally justified.

Contagious speech acts are distinct from ordinary performatives. While performative utterances enact identity or reality at the moment of articulation, contagious speech acts derive their force from ritualized repetition (Perinbanayagam, 2017). A single utterance such as “a woman must obey” may appear benign, but when repeated in homes, classrooms, mosques, and media, it becomes a culturally contagious idea that defines what is considered normal or moral. According to Butler (2021), these utterances circulate like viral language, taking root in the moral imagination of society and shaping behavioral expectations.

The contagious power of speech is most evident in how moral language is used to reinforce gender inequality. Terms like *sharam* (shame), *izzat* (honor), and *adab* (modesty) are deployed to categorize and control women’s behavior. These terms are rarely explained but widely understood, passed down from one generation to the next through speech acts that begin as advice and end as laws of conduct. Fatima and Mubeen (2023) argue that these expressions are not culturally neutral but ideological tools that determine who is allowed to speak, who must remain silent, and under what conditions resistance is permissible (Strauss, 2004).

The film *Bol* (2011), directed by Shoaib Mansoor, provides a valuable sociolinguistic lens for analyzing how patriarchal ideologies are enacted and contested through speech acts in a South Asian Islamic context. While this study is not about film theory or media critique, *Bol* functions as a case example that reflects wider social patterns of linguistic control, gendered authority, and discursive violence in Pakistan. Its narrative mirrors many of the real-life situations described throughout this research namely, how patriarchal norms are embedded in everyday language and how speech functions as both a means of suppression and a form of resistance.

In *Bol*, the family structure is ruled by a father figure whose authority is reinforced through moralized and religiously coded language. His control is not merely physical it is linguistic. He frequently silences his wife and daughters, uses commands that invoke religion, and discourages emotional expression or moral questioning. These speech patterns exemplify illocutionary acts that assert power and command obedience, framed as culturally appropriate and divinely sanctioned. While fictionalized, these representations resonate with real discourse patterns in many conservative households in Pakistan (Noor et al., 2024).

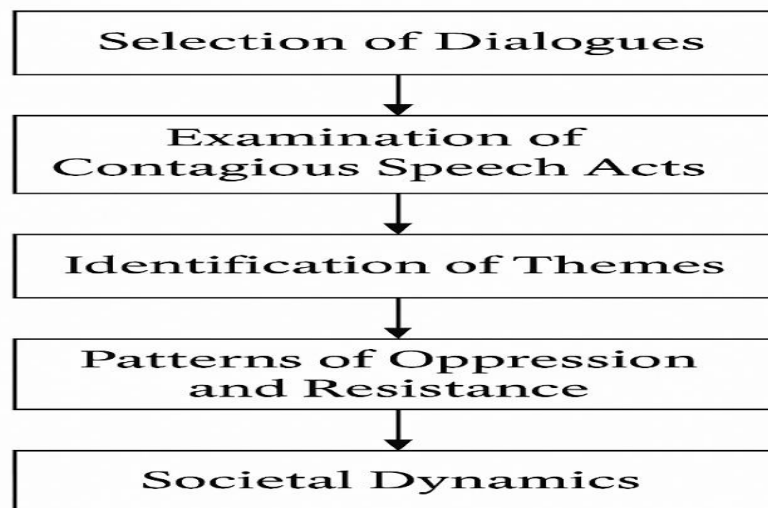
METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Judith Butler's concept of contagious speech acts, developed in her work *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (2021), offers a critical framework for understanding how language, once spoken, does not remain static or isolated. Instead, it circulates, replicates, and accumulates power as it moves across individuals, institutions, and social spaces. In patriarchal societies such as Pakistan, this form of speech becomes instrumental in sustaining gender norms, controlling bodies, and limiting possibilities for resistance. This study is grounded in interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks that explain how gender is constructed, policed, and resisted through language in patriarchal societies. At the center of this framework is Judith Butler's theory of performative and contagious speech acts, which positions language not merely as a medium of communication but as a social force that produces and reinforces gender norms. Butler (2021) argues that repeated utterances such as those related to obedience, modesty, or honor in patriarchal societies are not passive cultural expressions they are linguistic actions that maintain power hierarchies. These performative acts become contagious when they are ritually repeated and gain legitimacy through social and institutional endorsement.

FIGURE: 3.1: APPLIED FRAMEWORK

Thematic Flow of Content Analysis



DATA COLLECTION

The choice of *Bol* as a primary data source is intentional and methodologically justified through purposive sampling approach since, the story and situations in the selected film are related with the

aim of this study. Though fictional, the dialogues and interactions depicted in the film offer a realistic portrayal of speech practices that mirror actual sociocultural and religious discourses prevalent in Pakistani society. By carefully selecting specific speech situations from the film, such as father daughter conversations, courtroom statements, and dialogues addressing marginalized identities, this study aims to reveal how everyday language practices contribute to and sustain patriarchal control.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research follows a qualitative research design, specifically employing content analysis to explore the role of language in constructing and reinforcing gender oppression through contagious speech acts. The primary objective of the study is to examine selected dialogues from the Urdu language film *Bol* (2011), using Judith Butler's theory of performative and contagious speech acts as the analytical framework.

DATA ANALYSIS

Using Judith Butler's theory of performative and contagious speech acts, this study explores how certain expressions when repeated, moralized, and emotionally charged become tools of control and cultural regulation. The selected dialogues include speech between father and daughter, courtroom scenes, and utterances involving gender nonconforming characters. These are categorized and analyzed under four main themes:

- **Performative speech acts:** statements that assign roles, duties, and gender expectations
- **Excitable speech acts:** emotionally charged expressions that aim to shame, silence, or instill fear
- **Contagious speech acts:** repeated phrases and idioms that gain social authority through ritual use
- **Counter speech:** utterances that defy dominant norms and reclaim agency

Each dialogue is presented with its original Urdu version, a culturally sensitive English translation, and contextual interpretation. The analysis does not treat these as fictional or literary elements but as realistic portrayals of how speech functions in South Asian homes, courtrooms, and religious settings.

DIALOGUE 1

URDU

"Main is ghar ka maalik hoon. Meri marzi ke baghair yahan koi baat nahi hogi."

(میں اس گھر کا مالک ہوں۔ میری مرضی کے بغیر یہاں کوئی بات نہیں ہوگی۔)

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

"I am the owner of this house. Nothing will be said or done here without my permission."

CONTEXT

This line is spoken by Hakim (the father) during a family argument when one of his daughters expresses a view that contradicts his. The setting is their home, and the atmosphere is tense. The father's tone is commanding and final.

ANALYSIS

This is a classic performative speech act. By declaring himself the "owner" of the house, Hakim is not describing a legal or social status he is asserting and enacting authority over all others. The phrase "nothing will be said or done without my permission" functions not just as a rule but as a tool to silence others. It performs the act of erasing dissent and reinforces the patriarchal hierarchy within the family. According to Butler (2021), such utterances are central to the reproduction of gendered power because they define who has the right to speak and who must remain silent.

DIALOGUE 2

URDU

"Aurat ki zaban uski chaadar hoti hai."

(عورت کی زبان اس کی چادر ہوتی ہے۔)

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

"A woman's tongue is her veil."

CONTEXT

Hakim says this line in response to his daughter Zainab speaking up about an issue in front of the family. He uses this proverb like statement to publicly shame her for expressing herself.

ANALYSIS

This utterance functions performatively by assigning a moral boundary to a woman's voice. It equates speech with modesty and implies that a woman who speaks openly is immodest or dishonorable. In this way, the act of speaking becomes socially punishable. This speech act does not merely communicate a belief it produces a gendered expectation of silence and shame. It is also religiously framed, giving it additional authority and performative power in the context of a conservative Muslim household. As Butler suggests, performative utterances backed by cultural

legitimacy have the power to shape not just behavior but identity itself.

DIALOGUE 3

URDU

"Beta Allah ka inaam hota hai, beti to sirf zimmedari hoti hai."

(بیٹا اللہ کا انعام ہوتا ہے، بیٹی تو صرف ذمہ داری ہوتی ہے۔)

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

"A son is a gift from God; a daughter is just a responsibility."

CONTEXT

Spoken by Hakim after the birth of yet another daughter, this dialogue expresses his disappointment and anger. He says this in a religious tone, using it to justify his frustration in front of his wife.

ANALYSIS

This utterance performs the act of devaluation. By elevating sons as divine gifts and labeling daughters as burdens, the father is not merely stating a cultural belief he is actively enacting a social hierarchy. This speech act assigns worth based on gender, reinforcing systemic discrimination. Butler (1997) notes that repeated gendered expressions such as these not only reflect existing inequalities but solidify and perform them into being. The father's tone and timing after a birth also make this a performative act of punishment and guilt.

DIALOGUE 4

URDU

"Jab tak meri izzat is ghar mein hai, kisi ladki ko talim hasil karne ki ijazat nahi."

(جب تک میری عزت اس گھر میں ہے، کسی لڑکی کو تعلیم حاصل کرنے کی اجازت نہیں۔)

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

"As long as my honor exists in this house, no girl will be allowed to get an education."

CONTEXT

Hakim expresses this line when his daughter's express interest in continuing their education. The statement is made publicly, in the presence of other family members, and is delivered with absolute finality.

ANALYSIS

This is a clear performative speech act where the speaker uses language to assert moral authority and impose a rule. The father links the family's honor to the suppression of his

daughters' educational rights, effectively creating a binary between dignity and female autonomy. According to Butler (1997), such utterances not only define reality they create it. This statement performs two actions: it bans education and equates female aspiration with dishonor. In doing so, it enforces the father's dominance and re-establishes traditional gender roles by silencing intellectual ambition through moral speech.

DIALOGUE 5

URDU

"Jis ghar mein mard ki baat na mani jaye, wahan barbaadi hoti hai."

(جس گھر میں مرد کی بات نہ مانی جائے، وہاں بربادی ہوتی ہے۔)

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

"A house where a man's word is not followed is destined for ruin."

CONTEXT

This statement is made during a tense moment when Hakim feels his authority is being challenged. It is not directed at any one individual but said aloud in the household, functioning as both a warning and a command.

ANALYSIS

This utterance performs the act of re-establishing male supremacy. By invoking the concept of "ruin" as the result of non-compliance, the father positions his authority not as a preference but as a survival necessity. This kind of **moral performative** enacts fear, obedience, and gendered control through language. Butler's (2021) idea of contagious speech also begins to emerge here, as this kind of phrase is commonly repeated across families and generations, becoming part of the cultural script. It's performative in its assertion of male dominance and contagious in its repetition as a cultural truth.

DISCUSSION

These five examples demonstrate how language actively constructs power relations in the home, particularly by assigning moral value to silence, obedience, and gender conformity. The father in Bol does not merely describe his authority he enacts it, and that enactment becomes culturally legitimate through repetition and religious framing. The analysis revealed how language in patriarchal Pakistani contexts functions as a mechanism of both oppression and resistance. Dialogues were categorized and interpreted based on how they created, enforced, or contested gender norms, religious control, and moral authority.

The section on performative speech acts demonstrated how authority is enacted through speech. Expressions such as “I am the owner of this house” and “a woman’s tongue is her veil” did not merely reflect dominance they performed it, constructing and legitimizing hierarchical gender roles within the household. These utterances defined the power structure and made obedience a spoken requirement.

Contagious speech acts, such as “daughters are a burden” and “a woman’s dignity lies in her silence,” emerged as the most culturally embedded. Their power came not from who said them, but from how often and where they were repeated within homes, schools, mosques, and courts. These utterances gained their strength through circulation, becoming normalized and almost invisible carriers of patriarchal ideology.

Finally, the section on counter speech highlighted rare but powerful moments of resistance, particularly in Zainab’s courtroom testimony. Her declarations “I was not just a daughter, I was a human being too” acted as counter performative speech, refusing the identity imposed upon her. These moments reflected Butler’s concept that while language constructs oppression, it also contains the possibility of its undoing. Overall, the findings show that language is not passive in the reproduction of gender norms it is central to their maintenance and challenge. Through carefully selected and culturally resonant dialogues, Bol offers a linguistic microcosm of how patriarchal control is spoken into existence and occasionally spoken out of it.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how language, as both a cultural product and a social tool, contributes to the construction and perpetuation of systemic gender oppression. Through the lens of Judith Butler’s theory of performative and contagious speech acts, and with support from J.L. Austin’s foundational work, the research demonstrated that speech is not merely expressive it is formative. It shapes identities, enforces moral boundaries, and sustains ideological hierarchies, often under the guise of tradition or honor. By analyzing selected dialogues from Bol (2011), the study revealed that patriarchal authority is embedded in everyday phrases, religious references, and emotional appeals that circulate widely and often go unchallenged. These contagious speech acts operate as tools of control silencing women, glorifying male dominance, and framing obedience as virtue. Yet, the same film also illustrated the potential for counter speech, where truth is spoken in defiance of power, and language becomes a site of resistance. While the analysis was rooted in a cinematic narrative, the findings reflect broader realities in Pakistani society and other patriarchal cultures where speech disciplines live as much as laws do.

Recognizing this dynamic is essential not only for academic scholarship but for social transformation. Change begins not only in courtrooms or parliaments but in the words, we repeat, accept, and internalize.

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