



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 05 No. 01. Jan-March 2026. Page#5886-5900

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21967419>

CHALLENGING THE GRAND NARRATIVE OF MARRIAGE: A LYOTARDIAN READING OF KULSOOM BANO'S "A DEAD DAUGHTER"

Qandil Rehman

M.Phil. English literature, University of Management and Technology Lahore.

gandilrehman90@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines Kulsoom Bano's short story "A Dead Daughter," published in The Stained-Glass Window: Stories of the Pandemic from Pakistan, through Jean-François Lyotard's theory of grand narratives and petit récit. Against the social conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the story presents marriage, feminine obedience, familial duty, domestic violence, and female resistance as interconnected dimensions of gendered experience. This study argues that marriage in the story functions as a culturally legitimized grand narrative through which female worth, family respectability, and social success are defined. The ideal of the "good girl" reinforces this narrative by associating femininity with obedience, sacrifice, endurance, and accommodation. However, Mehru's experience of domestic suffering exposes the contradiction between the idealized meaning of marriage and its lived reality. The study further examines victim-blaming as a mechanism through which the dominant narrative attempts to preserve its legitimacy and interprets Mehru's resistance as a petit récit that challenges the universalizing claims of the marital order. The fragmented narrative structure is also examined as a formal strategy that disrupts singular narrative authority. Drawing on recent scholarship on Pakistani women's writing, gender, marriage, patriarchy, and pandemic experiences, the study offers a theoretically focused reading of an underexamined Pakistani pandemic text. It concludes that Bano's story does not merely represent domestic violence but interrogates the cultural narratives through which women's suffering can be normalized, justified, or rendered invisible.

Keywords: Lyotard, Grand Narrative, Petit Récit, Pakistani Women's Fiction, Marriage, Patriarchy, Domestic Violence, COVID-19

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic produced profound disruptions in social and domestic life. Lockdowns restricted mobility, increased household confinement, interrupted employment, and reduced access to social and institutional support. Although these conditions affected entire communities, their consequences were particularly significant for women experiencing unequal domestic relationships. Research conducted during the pandemic documented the relationship between economic stress, social isolation, household confinement, and violence against women in Pakistan (Munir et al., 2021; Dogar et al., 2022; Yasmin et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2023). International evidence similarly identified increased concerns regarding violence against women, reduced access to support services, and heightened insecurity during periods of COVID-19-related restrictions (UN Women, 2021; Ostadtaghizadeh et al., 2023). Recent evidence from Pakistan further demonstrates the continuing burden of intimate partner violence among women, indicating that such violence represents a structural concern rather than a temporary consequence of the pandemic (Shaikh, 2024). These findings indicate that the

pandemic did not create gender inequality but intensified vulnerabilities already embedded within domestic and social structures (Munir et al., 2021; Yasmin et al., 2022; Shaikh, 2024). Literature produced during the pandemic provides an important cultural record of these experiences. *The Stained-Glass Window: Stories of the Pandemic from Pakistan*, edited by Sana Munir and Taha Kehar and published by Liberty Publishing in 2020, brings together fictional responses to the social and psychological consequences of lockdown. Among its contributions, Kulsoom Bano's "A Dead Daughter" stands out for its representation of domestic violence and marital dysfunction. Contemporary literary commentary specifically identifies Bano's story as an account of domestic violence experienced within the claustrophobic conditions of pandemic confinement. The relevance of such literary representation is reinforced by scholarship demonstrating that Pakistani women's writing frequently engages with gender roles, domestic experience, patriarchal expectations, and women's struggles for agency (Malik et al., 2021; Salahuddin, 2021; Dahiyo & Naz, 2023). Pandemic literature thus provides not only a record of crisis but also a space for examining the gendered social structures exposed or intensified by that crisis.

The story, however, is significant beyond its representation of violence. Its central concern is the conflict between an idealized social understanding of marriage and the lived experience of a woman within that institution. Marriage is associated with achievement, respectability, family expectations, and feminine fulfilment, while Mehru's experience exposes violence and suffering within the marital home. The story therefore creates a tension between what marriage is expected to mean and what marriage actually becomes for the woman who inhabits it. This tension corresponds with recent scholarship on Pakistani fiction, which identifies marriage and family as important sites where gender roles, social expectations, and patriarchal authority are negotiated (Akram et al., 2021; Razia & Maan, 2022; Ramzan et al., 2023; Hussain et al., 2024). Studies of Pakistani women's writing further demonstrate that matrimonial expectations can become closely connected with female identity, social respectability, and the regulation of women's choices (Malik et al., 2021; Dahiyo & Naz, 2023). This tension can be productively examined through Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the grand narrative. Lyotard (1984) describes the postmodern condition through an "incredulity toward metanarratives," challenging universalizing accounts that claim to provide comprehensive legitimacy for social arrangements. A grand narrative does not necessarily appear as an explicit ideological doctrine. It may operate through culturally accepted assumptions concerning what constitutes a successful life, a respectable family, or an appropriate identity. Such culturally authorized assumptions can become particularly powerful when they are reproduced through everyday practices and social expectations. Recent studies of Pakistani women's fiction similarly demonstrate that gendered norms are frequently sustained through culturally recognizable ideas of femininity, family responsibility, marriage, and social respectability (Salahuddin, 2021; Akram et al., 2021; Ramzan et al., 2023).

In "A Dead Daughter," marriage can be understood in precisely these terms. It is not merely represented as a personal relationship but as a socially valued achievement. The description of marriage as a "grand trophy" transforms the institution into a symbol of familial success and social recognition. The individual woman's experience consequently becomes secondary to the social meaning assigned to her marriage. This representation is consistent with recent literary research showing that marriage can function as a mechanism through which women's social worth and familial position are constructed and evaluated (Razia & Maan, 2022; Ramzan et al., 2023; Gul et al., 2024). The story consequently allows marriage to be read not simply as a private institution but as a culturally legitimized system of expectations.

The narrative also constructs a gendered model of the “good girl.” The expectation of what “good girls” should do establishes a normative standard through which female conduct is judged. Obedience, endurance, and sacrifice consequently acquire moral value, while resistance can be interpreted as a failure to perform acceptable femininity. Research on Pakistani women's fiction has similarly identified the persistence of feminine and female archetypes shaped by culturally prescribed expectations, although transitions toward more explicitly resistant or feminist representations are also evident (Salahuddin, 2021). Studies of Pakistani fiction further show that women may negotiate, reproduce, or resist patriarchal expectations surrounding marriage and family (Malik et al., 2021; Akram et al., 2021; Dahiyo & Naz, 2023). The “good girl” therefore represents not merely an individual characterization but a broader cultural model of acceptable femininity.

Recent scholarship on Pakistani fiction supports the importance of examining these gendered constructions. Safdar et al. (2021) demonstrate that Pakistani fiction represents wifehood as a socially negotiated identity in which women may renegotiate traditional expectations rather than simply accept or reject them. Their study is particularly relevant because it emphasizes that Pakistani Muslim women cannot be reduced to a homogeneous or passive category; their agency emerges within specific cultural and social contexts. Similarly, research on Pakistani women's fiction demonstrates that literary texts frequently represent women negotiating patriarchal expectations, gender stereotypes, and culturally prescribed roles (Malik et al., 2021; Salahuddin, 2021; Dahiyo & Naz, 2023).

Anwar et al. (2022) demonstrate that marriage, family, and honour can operate as patriarchal structures through which women are objectified, marginalized, and subjected to violence. Safdar et al. (2022), examining *The Pakistani Bride*, similarly identify cultural practices and patriarchal discourse as mechanisms through which women's emotional, physical, and social subordination is reproduced. More recent studies continue to identify marriage, patriarchy, female identity, and resistance as interconnected concerns in Pakistani literary representation (Ramzan et al., 2023; Ghilzai et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024; Kalsoom et al., 2025).

1.2 Research problem

Existing scholarship has extensively examined Pakistani women's literary representation in relation to patriarchy, gender inequality, marriage, domestic oppression, and female agency. However, relatively little attention has been paid to how the **cultural narrative of marriage itself** becomes legitimized and how an individual woman's experience can destabilize that legitimacy.

This problem is particularly relevant to “A Dead Daughter.” The story represents a woman whose lived experience contradicts the socially desirable meaning attached to marriage, yet the surrounding social environment initially responds by preserving the institution's legitimacy rather than questioning it. The resulting conflict is therefore simultaneously gendered and narrative: whose interpretation of marriage is accepted as legitimate—the socially authorized interpretation or the woman's lived experience?

The story's fragmented narrative form further complicates this question by presenting different perspectives and temporal moments rather than a single authoritative account. The present study consequently investigates how Bano uses both content and narrative form to challenge a dominant cultural narrative.

1.3 Research questions

1. How does “A Dead Daughter” construct marriage as a grand narrative?
2. How do feminine obedience, sacrifice, and the ideal of the “good girl” reinforce this narrative?

3. How does the representation of domestic violence and victim-blaming expose contradictions within the dominant narrative of marriage?
4. How can Mehru's experience and resistance be understood through Lyotard's concept of the *petit récit*?
5. How does the story's fragmented narrative structure challenge singular narrative authority?

1.4 Research objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine the construction of marriage as a grand narrative in "A Dead Daughter."
2. Analyze the representation of feminine obedience, sacrifice, and socially prescribed femininity.
3. Examine domestic violence and victim-blaming as mechanisms that protect the legitimacy of the marital narrative.
4. Interpret Mehru's localized experience and resistance through Lyotard's concept of the *petit récit*.
5. Examine narrative fragmentation as a formal challenge to singular authority.

1.5 Research gap and significance

Recent research has established a substantial critical tradition concerning Pakistani women's writing, patriarchy, marriage, gendered violence, and female resistance. Studies have examined women's exploitation in Pakistani short fiction, patriarchal structures surrounding marriage and family, and the ways female characters negotiate or resist socially prescribed roles (Dahiyo & Naz, 2023; Safdar et al., 2021; Anwar et al., 2022). Other studies have explored the representation of women's agency and the rejection of stereotypical representations in Pakistani fiction.

However, the scholarship specifically addressing Kulsoom Bano's "A Dead Daughter" remains extremely limited. The story has been recognized in contemporary literary commentary as a significant representation of domestic violence during lockdown, but it has not received the sustained Lyotardian analysis undertaken here.

More importantly, existing approaches generally emphasize what patriarchy does to women rather than examining how the cultural narratives supporting patriarchal arrangements become legitimate. The present study addresses this gap by conceptualizing marriage as a grand narrative and Mehru's particular experience as a *petit récit*. It therefore contributes a more focused account of the relationship among narrative authority, gender ideology, domestic violence, and female resistance.

2. Literature review

2.1 Pakistani women's fiction and patriarchal representation

Pakistani women's fiction has long provided a literary space for representing women's experiences within family, marriage, social hierarchy, and cultural expectations. Recent scholarship confirms that these texts frequently challenge restrictive representations of women while simultaneously revealing the persistence of conventional gender roles.

Salahuddin (2021) examines feminist archetypes in fiction by Pakistani women writers and finds that feminine and female archetypes remain more common than explicitly feminist representations, although movement toward feminist consciousness is visible in some texts. This finding is useful for the present study because Mehru's characterization similarly develops through a tension between socially prescribed femininity and resistance.

Dahiyo and Naz (2023) examine Pakistani women's short stories through a feminist understanding of patriarchy and find that women are represented as experiencing exploitation

through patriarchal institutions and social expectations. Their focus on short fiction is particularly relevant to Bano's story because it demonstrates how the short-story form can concentrate gendered conflict within specific domestic and social situations.

Research on Pakistani fiction also emphasizes that women's experiences should not be reduced to a single model of oppression. Safdar et al. (2021) argue that Pakistani Muslim women represented in fiction negotiate wifehood in culturally situated ways. Their findings challenge interpretations that treat Muslim women as a homogeneous passive group and instead emphasize negotiation, agency, and redefinition. This perspective is important for the present study because Mehru is analyzed not simply as a victim but as a subject whose resistance disrupts an established narrative.

2.2 Marriage, wifehood, and gendered expectations

Marriage represents a particularly important site of gender negotiation in Pakistani literature. Safdar et al. (2021) demonstrate that wifehood can be renegotiated by women who operate within, rather than completely outside, established cultural structures. Their study shows that Pakistani women's agency can emerge through the modification and re-signification of expectations surrounding wifehood.

Anwar et al. (2022), in their analysis of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Bride*, provide a complementary perspective by identifying marriage, family, and honour as patriarchal structures through which women can be commodified and marginalized. Their findings show that challenges to patriarchal expectations may produce further gendered violence.

Safdar et al. (2022) similarly demonstrate that women's oppression in *The Pakistani Bride* is reproduced through cultural practices and patriarchal discourse. Their discourse-oriented approach is particularly useful because it demonstrates that power operates through language and social meaning as well as physical domination.

Together, these studies establish marriage as more than a private institution. It is a cultural structure through which femininity, family respectability, and women's social position are negotiated. "A Dead Daughter" extends this concern by showing what happens when the socially idealized meaning of marriage conflicts with a woman's lived reality.

2.3 Female agency and resistance

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes female agency rather than representing Pakistani women solely as passive victims. Studies of Pakistani fiction demonstrate that women may challenge patriarchal structures through direct resistance, negotiation, or redefinition of socially prescribed identities.

Salahuddin (2021) identifies transitions from feminine and female representations toward feminist consciousness in Pakistani women's fiction. Safdar et al. (2021) similarly demonstrate that women represented in Pakistani fiction can renegotiate wifehood and create forms of agency within culturally specific structures.

This scholarship is relevant to Mehru's characterization because her resistance should not be interpreted simply as an individual rejection of marriage. Its significance lies in the challenge it poses to the cultural expectation that women should accept prescribed roles. From a Lyotardian perspective, Mehru's experience becomes a *petit récit*: a localized account that does not claim universal authority but exposes the inadequacy of the dominant narrative.

2.4 Domestic violence and gendered power

Literary representations of domestic violence are closely connected with broader cultural structures surrounding marriage and family. Contemporary research on Pakistani women's writing demonstrates that violence may be physical, emotional, psychological, social, or discursive.

Anwar et al. (2022) show that patriarchal structures surrounding marriage and honour can produce conditions in which women are treated as objects of male authority. Safdar et al. (2022) similarly identify emotional, physical, and social oppression as interconnected features of women's experiences within patriarchal structures.

The empirical context of the COVID-19 pandemic strengthens the relevance of these literary concerns. Studies in Pakistan found that lockdown conditions were associated with economic stress, family tension, psychological distress, and domestic violence (Munir et al., 2021; Dogar et al., 2022; Yasmin et al., 2022). "A Dead Daughter" transforms these broader social conditions into a literary representation in which confinement intensifies domestic power relations.

The significance of Bano's story therefore lies in its connection between domestic space and narrative authority. The home is culturally associated with security and family, yet the story reveals that it can also become the location in which violence is normalized and concealed.

2.5 Pandemic literature and "A Dead Daughter"

The Stained-Glass Window is a significant contribution to Pakistani pandemic literature because it records diverse experiences of lockdown through fiction. The volume was published by Liberty Publishing in 2020 and contains 249 pages.

Within the collection, "A Dead Daughter" is particularly relevant to gender studies. Contemporary literary criticism describes the story as a courageous treatment of domestic violence and emphasizes its claustrophobic representation of domestic dysfunction during lockdown.

The pandemic context is therefore not merely decorative. Lockdown intensifies the conditions under which the story's central contradiction operates. The woman is expected to find fulfilment and security within the domestic sphere, while the same sphere becomes increasingly difficult to escape when it becomes abusive.

This contradiction enables the story to move beyond a simple representation of pandemic anxiety. It uses the pandemic to expose the instability of a pre-existing social narrative about home, marriage, and femininity.

2.6 Positioning the present study

The literature demonstrates that Pakistani women's fiction has been examined extensively in relation to patriarchy, marriage, female exploitation, gender roles, and resistance. However, there remains a need for focused research on the narrative legitimacy of these structures.

The present study responds to this need by applying Lyotard's distinction between grand narratives and *petits récits* to Bano's "A Dead Daughter." Rather than asking only whether Mehru is oppressed, the study asks how the cultural narrative of marriage makes particular forms of female behaviour appear natural and morally necessary.

The study therefore makes three specific interventions. First, it treats marriage as a grand narrative of social legitimacy rather than merely as an oppressive institution. Second, it interprets Mehru's individual experience as a localized counter-narrative that exposes the limits of the dominant account. Third, it considers the story's fragmented narrative form as part of its challenge to singular authority.

This approach distinguishes the present study from existing feminist readings by emphasizing the relationship between gender, narrative authority, and legitimation.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Lyotard's grand narratives and *petit récit*

Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the grand narrative provides the principal theoretical framework for this study. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard (1984) characterizes the postmodern condition through an "incredulity toward metanarratives." Grand narratives are

overarching systems of meaning that claim to legitimize social, moral, political, or cultural arrangements. Their authority depends on presenting particular historical and cultural arrangements as universal, natural, or inevitable. The postmodern condition challenges this authority by exposing the partiality of such narratives and recognizing the legitimacy of localized forms of knowledge.

Lyotard's concept of the *petit récit*, or little narrative, is equally important. Unlike the grand narrative, the little narrative does not claim universal authority. It is situated, particular, and connected to lived experience. Its significance lies in its ability to reveal experiences that a dominant narrative cannot adequately accommodate.

For the present study, marriage is treated as a gendered grand narrative. Within the social world represented in "A Dead Daughter," marriage is associated with female fulfilment, familial success, respectability, and social legitimacy. The story challenges these assumptions by presenting Mehru's experience as evidence that the dominant narrative cannot adequately account for women lived realities.

3.2 Gender and the performance of femininity

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is used as a supporting framework rather than as a second primary theory. Butler (1990) conceptualizes gender as produced through repeated social practices rather than as a fixed natural identity. This perspective helps explain how the narrative of marriage is translated into everyday expectations concerning feminine behaviour.

The category of the "good girl" in Bano's story represents such a performance. Obedience, sacrifice, silence, and accommodation become markers of acceptable femininity. The theoretical significance of this construction lies in the fact that behaviours imposed through social expectations can appear voluntary and morally desirable.

3.3 Narrative fragmentation and postmodern critique

Linda Hutcheon's concept of postmodern critique provides a supporting framework for examining narrative form. The story does not simply reject dominant cultural conventions; it exposes their contradictions from within. Its fragmented structure and multiple perspectives challenge the assumption that a single narrative can provide complete authority over Mehru's experience.

The combination of Lyotard, Butler, and Hutcheon therefore allows the study to examine three connected dimensions: the cultural narrative of marriage, the gendered performance required by that narrative, and the fragmented narrative form through which Bano challenges its authority.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative close-reading methodology. Close reading is appropriate because the research examines the language, imagery, characterization, narrative structure, and ideological assumptions through which the story constructs and challenges the marriage narrative.

The primary text is Kulsoom Bano's "A Dead Daughter," published in *The Stained-Glass Window: Stories of the Pandemic from Pakistan*. Secondary material consists of theoretical works on postmodernism and gender, together with recent scholarship on Pakistani women's fiction, marriage, patriarchy, and domestic violence.

The analysis is thematic rather than sequential. Selected textual passages are examined according to four interconnected concerns: marriage as grand narrative, feminine conformity, resistance and localized experience, and narrative fragmentation. Each textual element is interpreted first in its immediate context and then in relation to Lyotard's concepts of grand narrative and *petit récit*.

The study is limited to the selected short story and does not attempt to generalize its findings to all Pakistani women's fiction.

5. Analysis and discussion

The close reading demonstrates that Kulsoom Bano's "A Dead Daughter" constructs marriage, feminine obedience, familial duty, domestic violence, and female resistance as interconnected dimensions of gendered experience. Rather than representing patriarchy solely as an external structure of male domination, the story reveals the narratives through which patriarchal expectations become socially legitimate and psychologically internalized. Marriage is presented as a culturally valued achievement, feminine obedience as a moral expectation, and women's suffering as something that can be normalized or attributed to women themselves. Read through Jean-François Lyotard's concept of grand narratives, these representations expose the instability of culturally dominant assumptions and create space for Mehru's localized experience as a *petit récit*. The analysis therefore moves from the social construction of marriage to the gendered conditioning that sustains it, the violence concealed within the marital ideal, the victim-blaming mechanisms that protect that ideal, Mehru's resistance, and finally the fragmented narrative form through which Bano challenges singular interpretive authority.

5.1 Marriage as a culturally legitimized grand narrative

The most direct articulation of the marriage grand narrative appears in Bano's description of marriage as "a grand trophy that her mother had to win" (Bano, 2020, p. 144). The metaphor of the "trophy" is significant because a trophy represents achievement, recognition, and social status. By applying this term to marriage, Bano shifts attention from emotional compatibility or individual fulfilment toward the social value attached to a woman's marital status. Marriage becomes something that must be successfully obtained and publicly validated.

This representation corresponds closely with Lyotard's understanding of grand narratives as legitimizing systems that present particular social arrangements as natural, universal, and self-evident (Lyotard, 1984). The mother's investment in Mehru's marriage demonstrates how such a narrative becomes internalized. She does not simply want her daughter to marry; she experiences the marriage as an achievement of her own. The mother consequently becomes both a subject of the marriage narrative and an agent through whom that narrative is reproduced. The story therefore demonstrates that patriarchal narratives do not depend exclusively on direct male authority; they can also be reproduced by women who have internalized their social legitimacy.

The marriage narrative also shapes Mehru's educational aspirations. Her decision to study economics is influenced by the expectation that she will eventually be married, making education appear temporary and secondary to marriage (Bano, 2020). In this context, education does not function primarily as a means of individual development. Its value is measured against the anticipated marital trajectory. Women's personal aspirations are consequently subordinated to a predetermined social script.

The same logic is visible in the family's concern with dowry and public reputation. Mehru's parents cannot allow their daughter to leave the household without material gifts because they fear criticism from the groom's family and other observers (Bano, 2020). Marriage therefore connects the woman's personal transition with family honour and social evaluation. The institution acquires authority because it is supported by an entire network of expectations concerning respectability, parental responsibility, and female destiny.

This interpretation extends scholarship on Pakistani women's writing, which has identified marriage, family, and gender roles as significant sites of negotiation between patriarchal

expectations and female agency (Safdar et al., 2021; Salahuddin, 2021; Razia & Maan, 2022; Ramzan et al., 2023). However, Bano's story adds another dimension by revealing how the narrative of marriage becomes legitimate in the first place. Marriage is powerful not simply because society demands it, but because it is represented as an achievement that appears desirable and morally necessary.

5.2 The “good girl” and domestic conditioning

The grand narrative of marriage is reinforced by a corresponding narrative of acceptable femininity. Bano captures this construction through the phrase “what good girls were expected to do” (Bano, 2020, p. 143). The apparently ordinary expression “good girls” carries substantial ideological weight. It establishes a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable femininity and implies that women's behaviour should conform to a recognizable social standard.

The significance of the phrase lies partly in its apparent naturalness. The narrative does not present the expectations placed upon “good girls” as controversial; within the social world of the story, they are treated as self-evident. This is precisely how a grand narrative operates. It does not need to be constantly defended because its assumptions have already been normalized. Lyotard's concept of legitimation is therefore useful for explaining how the category of the “good girl” transforms culturally specific expectations into apparently universal standards of female behaviour.

Bano further illustrates this conditioning through Mehru's learned self-effacement. Mehru makes herself “non-existent” during moments of crisis and finds solace in silence when confronted by patriarchal anger (Bano, 2020). Her silence is consequently not simply an individual personality trait. It is the result of repeated social conditioning. The story suggests that women can learn to disappear within situations in which their presence, voice, or resistance might provoke further conflict.

The statement that Mehru “conditioned herself to put everyone else's needs ahead of her own because that's what good girls were expected to do” (Bano, 2020, p. 143) makes this process particularly explicit. The verb “conditioned” suggests repetition and internalization. Mehru has learned to treat self-denial as an appropriate feminine response. Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity helps explain this process: femininity is produced through repeated behaviours that eventually appear natural rather than socially imposed.

The story also reveals the suppression of desire before Mehru enters marriage. Her recognition that “No matter what her heart wanted, she listened to her mind far more obediently” demonstrates the conflict between personal desire and socially disciplined behaviour (Bano, 2020). Likewise, when she gives up arguing with her mother because it appears futile, the narrative depicts how repeated experiences of limited agency can produce silence.

The “good girl” therefore functions as more than a characterization. It is a gendered metanarrative that teaches women how they should behave. As previous research on Pakistani women's fiction has demonstrated, literary representations of women frequently negotiate conventional feminine archetypes alongside emerging forms of resistance (Malik et al., 2021; Salahuddin, 2021; Dahiyo & Naz, 2023). Bano's contribution lies in showing the psychological process through which conformity is learned and how qualities conventionally celebrated as feminine virtue can conceal self-erasure.

5.3 Lived reality versus the myth of marital security

The authority of the marriage narrative becomes unstable when it encounters the lived experiences of Tahira and Mehru. Marriage is culturally associated with security, respectability, and family stability, yet Bano repeatedly represents the marital home as a site of fear, humiliation, and violence. Tahira's experience establishes that this contradiction predates

Mehru's marriage. Her husband is described as a tyrant who makes her feel like a slave within the same household that she dutifully maintains (Bano, 2020).

Tahira's experience is important because it establishes an intergenerational pattern. Mehru grows up observing a marriage in which women's endurance has become normalized. The daughter therefore encounters the marriage narrative not only through explicit expectations but through the example of her mother's life. The story consequently presents patriarchy as something reproduced across generations through observation, socialization, and repetition.

Mehru's own marriage exposes the consequences more violently. Kamal's physical abuse demonstrates the distance between the ideal of marital protection and the reality of domestic violence. His violence against Mehru transforms the home from a culturally idealized space of security into a site of bodily vulnerability. The contrast is central to Bano's critique: the same institution that is presented as a woman's proper destination becomes the environment in which her safety is most severely compromised.

The story also depicts male indifference toward female suffering. When concern is expressed about a woman's condition, the response that she is still alive minimizes the seriousness of her suffering (Bano, 2020). Violence is therefore represented not only through physical aggression but also through the refusal to recognize women's pain as significant.

The COVID-19 setting intensifies this contradiction. Bano explains that lockdown halted Mehru's husband's job search and "her own attempts to gain freedom" (Bano, 2020). The pandemic therefore restricts the external possibilities through which Mehru might challenge her circumstances. As anxiety increases, the domestic environment becomes more restrictive and emotionally volatile.

This representation corresponds with empirical research showing that pandemic-related confinement, economic stress, and reduced mobility intensified women's vulnerability to domestic violence in Pakistan (Munir et al., 2021; Dogar et al., 2022; Yasmin et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2023). The pandemic should therefore be understood as an exacerbating condition rather than the original source of patriarchal violence. Bano's story reveals structures that already exist and shows how lockdown makes them more difficult to escape.

5.4 Victim-blaming and the preservation of the marriage narrative

The story further demonstrates that grand narratives preserve their authority by reinterpreting experiences that contradict them. When marriage fails to provide the security and fulfilment culturally attributed to it, responsibility is shifted toward the woman. The in-laws' response to Mehru's circumstances illustrates this process through accusations concerning her spending and failure to save money (Bano, 2020).

The logic behind such accusations is significant. If the husband is financially irresponsible or abusive, the ideal of marriage is placed under pressure. By attributing the problem to the wife, however, the social narrative can remain intact. Mehru is transformed from a woman experiencing structural and domestic violence into a woman who is supposedly responsible for the instability of her own household.

The same mechanism appears when Mehru's economic contribution is dismissed. Her home tuition earnings do not provide her with greater authority within the household; instead, Kamal uses her relatively small income to belittle her right to speak. Economic participation therefore fails to produce genuine domestic equality because male authority continues to determine the boundaries of acceptable female speech.

Tahira's self-blame demonstrates the internal dimension of this process. The statement that "Tahira did what she had always done: she blamed herself" (Bano, 2020) reveals how deeply

the dominant narrative has been internalized. She does not initially interpret her suffering as evidence of a flawed patriarchal arrangement; she interprets it through personal responsibility. Victim-blaming thus functions as an ideological mechanism that protects the marriage narrative. Rather than asking whether the institution or its gendered power relations are responsible for women's suffering, the narrative redirects attention toward women's supposed deficiencies. This finding supports scholarship identifying marriage, honour, and family structures as important mechanisms through which patriarchal power is reproduced in Pakistani literary representations (Anwar et al., 2022; Safdar et al., 2022; Hussain et al., 2024). From a Lyotardian perspective, the significance of victim-blaming lies in its re-narration of contradictory experience. The suffering woman cannot simply be acknowledged as evidence that the dominant narrative has failed. Her experience must first be explained away. Bano's narrative prevents this erasure by allowing the reader to recognize the contradiction between the social explanation and Mehru's lived experience.

5.5 Mehru's resistance as a *petit récit*

Lyotard's *petit récit* provides a useful way of understanding Mehru's resistance. Unlike a grand narrative, a *petit récit* does not claim universal authority. It is localized, particular, and grounded in individual experience (Lyotard, 1984). Mehru's resistance functions in this manner because she does not formulate a new universal theory of marriage. Instead, she rejects the specific narrative that has governed her own life.

Her rejection of her mother's model is particularly important. Mehru reflects on why her mother accepted "a life devoid of love and respect" and recognizes that this is not a life she wants for herself (Bano, 2020). This moment marks a break in the intergenerational reproduction of feminine endurance. Tahira's life had provided a model of what a woman was expected to tolerate; Mehru refuses to accept that model as inevitable.

Her confrontation with Ahmer further exposes the intergenerational nature of the problem. When Ahmer questions the example being provided to Mehru's son, Mehru responds that it is "the same example that our father has set for us" (Bano, 2020). Her response redirects responsibility from the individual woman to the inherited patriarchal pattern. The exchange therefore challenges the assumption that women alone are responsible for preserving family structures.

Mehru's final rooftop scene represents the most radical form of her refusal. The story opens with Mehru standing at the edge of a rooftop, looking toward the playground where her son once played (Bano, 2020, p. 142). Her later recollection that she once believed suffering to be inherent to survival but can no longer accept it marks a decisive rejection of compulsory endurance.

However, Mehru's death should not be interpreted simplistically as liberation. Her final act can be read as a radical rupture with the narrative of obligatory endurance, while its tragic outcome simultaneously exposes the severe limitations placed upon her available forms of resistance. This distinction is important because a reading that treats death as uncomplicated empowerment would overlook the violence of the conditions that make such an extreme response imaginable.

Mehru's *petit récit* therefore does not replace the marriage grand narrative with another universal narrative. Instead, it exposes the inability of the dominant narrative to accommodate her particular experience. Her significance lies precisely in the fact that her experience cannot be comfortably absorbed into the cultural script of the obedient wife.

5.6 Narrative structure and intergenerational voices

The story's thematic critique is reinforced by its fragmented narrative form. Bano opens the narrative *in medias res*, with Mehru standing on a rooftop, before moving backward and across different perspectives and temporal moments. This structure denies the reader the straightforward chronology normally associated with a conventional domestic narrative.

The fragmented organization is particularly significant because the grand narrative of marriage itself implies a predictable life sequence: marriage, domestic life, endurance, and either fulfilment or tragedy. Bano disrupts this linear expectation by moving between Mehru's, Tahira's, and Ahmer's experiences. The result is a narrative in which no single perspective possesses complete authority.

The intergenerational relationship between Tahira and Mehru is especially important. Tahira's experience represents the earlier reproduction of the marriage narrative, while Mehru's experience reveals its consequences and eventually challenges its inevitability. Their stories are therefore connected but not identical. The fragmentation allows the reader to see both continuity and rupture across generations.

This formal strategy corresponds with the postmodern concern with fragmentation and the rejection of totalizing explanatory systems. The existing theoretical framework of the study identifies Hutcheon's concept of postmodern complicity and critique as useful because Bano's narrative simultaneously inhabits and challenges the cultural scripts it represents. The story does not simply reject marriage from outside; it exposes its contradictions from within the social world that gives the institution authority.

The formal structure therefore performs an argument similar to the thematic content. Just as Mehru's individual experience disrupts the claim that marriage provides a universally desirable form of female fulfilment, the fragmented narrative disrupts the idea that one coherent perspective can explain women's experience. Form and content consequently work together in the story's postmodern critique.

5.7 Results

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates that "A Dead Daughter" challenges the marriage grand narrative through the interconnected representations of marriage as a culturally valued achievement, the "good girl" as a gendered model of obedience and self-sacrifice, and victim-blaming as a mechanism for preserving these expectations. Tahira's and Mehru's experiences expose the gap between the idealized image of marriage and the lived reality of domestic violence, while Mehru's resistance gives authority to a localized female experience that functions as a *petit récit*. The story's fragmented and multi-perspectival structure further challenges the assumption that a single narrative can possess complete authority over women's experiences.

The findings extend the Lyotardian interpretation by shifting attention from patriarchy as a social structure to the narrative processes through which patriarchal expectations acquire legitimacy. Marriage becomes powerful because it is represented as desirable and socially prestigious, while the "good girl" ideal appears morally self-evident and victim-blaming preserves the dominant explanation when women's experiences contradict it. The pandemic setting intensifies these contradictions by restricting mobility and increasing domestic confinement, but it functions primarily as a condition that exposes existing gender inequalities rather than as their original cause. Ultimately, "A Dead Daughter" demonstrates how localized female experience can challenge dominant narratives of marriage, femininity, sacrifice, and female suffering without claiming to replace them with another universal narrative.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined Kulsoom Bano's "A Dead Daughter" through Jean-François Lyotard's concepts of grand narratives and *petit récit*, with Butler's theory of gender performativity and Hutcheon's account of postmodern critique used as complementary perspectives. The analysis demonstrates that the story's treatment of marriage extends beyond the representation of an unhappy domestic relationship. Marriage is constructed as a culturally authoritative narrative through which female fulfilment, family achievement, respectability, and appropriate femininity are defined.

The metaphor of marriage as a "grand trophy" is central to this construction. It reveals that the value assigned to marriage is not determined exclusively by the emotional or personal wellbeing of the woman involved but by its symbolic significance within the family and society. Mehru's marriage consequently becomes an achievement that others can claim, evaluate, and protect. The narrative exposes the consequences of such a construction when the woman's lived experience contradicts the social meaning attached to the institution.

The study has also demonstrated that the grand narrative of marriage is supported by a corresponding narrative of feminine respectability. The category of the "good girl" establishes obedience, sacrifice, and endurance as desirable feminine qualities. In this framework, resistance can be interpreted as deviance, while submission can be represented as virtue. Bano's story exposes the ideological violence contained within this distinction by showing how the demand for feminine conformity can obscure or normalize suffering.

A further finding concerns the treatment of Mehru's suffering. Instead of allowing domestic violence to invalidate the idealized image of marriage, the surrounding social structure attempts to reinterpret Mehru as responsible for her own difficulties. This victim-blaming mechanism preserves the legitimacy of the dominant narrative by transferring attention from structural or institutional failure to individual female behaviour.

Against this dominant narrative, Mehru's resistance functions as a *petit récit*. Her experience does not constitute another universal theory of marriage; rather, it is a particular and embodied account that demonstrates the inadequacy of the supposedly universal narrative imposed upon her. Her resistance therefore acquires significance precisely because it emerges from lived experience. It punctures the claim that the established order is inevitable without replacing it with another totalizing system.

The story's form reinforces this thematic argument. Its non-linear movement and shifting perspectives prevent the reader from receiving a single authoritative version of events. The fragmentation is therefore not merely an aesthetic feature but part of the story's critique of totalizing narratives. The form reproduces the plurality and instability that the content reveals. The study consequently argues that "A Dead Daughter" can be understood as a Lyotardian text in which the authority of a culturally dominant narrative is challenged through localized female experience. Its contribution lies not only in representing domestic violence during the pandemic but also in exposing the narratives through which women's suffering can be rendered acceptable, invisible, or self-inflicted.

6.1 Limitations and directions for future research

The study is limited to a qualitative close reading of one short story. It therefore does not claim to represent the full range of Pakistani women's pandemic writing or to establish that the narrative of marriage operates identically across different Pakistani communities and literary texts. Its purpose is interpretive rather than sociological.

Future research could extend this framework through comparative studies of Pakistani pandemic fiction, particularly texts representing women's experiences of marriage, domestic confinement, and gendered violence. Comparative research could also examine how *petits*

récits operate across different forms of Pakistani women's writing and how localized female narratives negotiate competing cultural, familial, and institutional authorities.

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