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## A Sociolinguistic Study of Taboos and Euphemisms Surrounding Pakistani Females' Daily Issues

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**Abstract:** *This research paper is an endeavour to delineate various linguistic taboos about women's physiology with a focus on both the categories and functions of taboos in Pakistani society. The aim is to bring forth myriad euphemistic expressions employed in print media. The paper contests that taboos are moderated at the expanse of society's cultural and religious norms. It also offers a rationale behind the popular use of euphemistic expressions for Pakistani Females' daily issues. Allan & Burridge's (2006) theoretical framework furnished the basic framework for the analysis of different euphemistic expressions. The data for the study comprises thirteen different English newspaper articles published in the last six years (2016-2021). The data analysis revealed that euphemisms could connote multiple shades of meaning ranging from shame, disgust, exasperation, and upliftment. It was established that euphemisms operate along dysphemism and orthophemism interchangeably depending on the context in which they appeared.*

**Key Words:** Euphemism, Gender Studies, Orthophemism, Sociolinguistics, Taboo

### Introduction

"The pandemic of patriarchy" was a major slogan raised during the Aurat March in Pakistan last year ([the Guardian, 2021](#)). The catchy and eye-opening headline of a reputable newspaper drew attention to the precarious situation of women folk of Pakistan. In a country where mobilization of women for a peaceful protest is deemed as a cataclysmic event, other concerns such as health care and basic human rights are often silently swept under the carpet. The language employed to talk about women's issues is

emblematic of how gender and language intersect in society. This research paper aims to draw attention to taboo expressions used for females' everyday matters within the Pakistani context.

Every society has a specified code of conduct that all the members must abide by. Those values and shared belief systems are regarded as social norms and taboos. The word "taboo" is a derivative form of the Tongan word *tabu*, which gained acceptance in the English language during the late eighteenth century. The Tongan culture of Polynesia regarded certain objects, actions, and

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words as hazardous that might affect people ([Strazny, 2005](#)). According to Encyclopedia Britannica, a taboo is defined as “the prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behavior is either too sacred and consecrated or too dangerous and accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake (2020). Taboos are repugnant actions or behaviors which may refer to bodily functions also. Keith [Allan and Kate Burridge \(2006\)](#) define taboo as a “proscription of behavior that affects everyday life” (6). Often the everyday issues concerning women are brushed under the label of women's matters. Such a misnomer obliterates the experiences and contributions of the female gender world over. US Congress had reiterated that gender-based violence, lack of political and economic opportunities are the burning issues that assail women folk worldwide (Global women's issues, 2021). However, in Pakistan, a lack of awareness concerning feminine issues is a major problem. Period shaming stops women from focusing on their health and wellbeing. “The word period is referenced discreetly in Pakistani society. You mouth it. You make facial gestures. You abruptly end your sentence, leaving the word hanging in the air till it feels heavy and gives away the plot” ([Raza, 2021](#)). It is noteworthy that members of a given society avoid speaking about taboo acts and often rely on euphemisms and metaphors to say things in a roundabout manner. Incidentally, the menstrual taboo is prevalent in the majority of cultures despite the fact that it is a natural process. In the same vein, inhibition to talking about female breasts is a major reason; women are afraid of getting themselves checked and treated for breast cancer. It is alarming that Pakistan has the highest ratio of breast cancer in South Asia ([Asif et al., 2014](#)). The cultural norms of a given society determine what is considered a taboo and how that taboo is effectively handled ([Strazny, 2005](#)). Consequently, all of us are cautious of censoring our language lest we might offend someone around us. There is a distinction between cultural and linguistic taboos. It is not mandatory that both these taboos may provoke similar reactions from all and sundry. In other words, as Walker points out, “it is possible to have a linguistic taboo on speaking about a certain behavior or process

while the behavior itself is not taboo, i.e., menstruating as a natural process of the body is not a tabooed act but to speak about it candidly and directly is considered taboo in many cultures” (2014, p 6). Every society has an unwritten list of sociocultural norms which are labeled as taboos.

[T]opics such as bodies and their effluvia (sweat, snot, feces, menstrual fluid, etc.); the organs and acts of sex, micturition, and defecation; diseases, death, and killing (including hunting and fishing); naming, addressing, touching and viewing persons and sacred beings, objects and places; food gathering, preparation, and consumption ([Allan & Burridge, 2006 p 1](#)).

Violation of a taboo is an unpardonable sin that may result in death or corporal punishment. The stringent blasphemy laws in Pakistan are emblematic of those phenomena ([Mazhar, 2016](#)). As a woman myself, I feel the majority of us feel uncomfortable talking about basic bodily functions, and somehow it negatively affects our evaluative sense of Self.

### Sociocultural Background

Patriarchal mindset and overwhelming cultural restrictions on women are the major contributing factors affecting the status of women in Pakistan. By cultural restrictions, it is meant that many sanctions are imposed on women by men, for example, many men restrict women from leaving home unchaperoned ([Khan & Hussain, 2008](#)). Consequently, traditional honor codes have also affected other spheres of a woman's wellbeing. The barbaric ritualistic murder of women under the guise of Karo Kari is an example of honour killing in Pakistan ([Soomro, 2022](#)). Basically, the patriarchal mindset has foreordained the social value of gender. This harrowing account of gender disparity was substantiated by the annual report published by the World Economic Forum (WEF). The Global Gender Gap Report 2021 stated that amongst 156 countries included in the study, Pakistan had ranked 152nd in economic participation and opportunity, while it ranked 153rd in health and survival ([Siddiqui, 2021](#)). The report had painted a dreary and bleak future for

Pakistani females by highlighting how progress had stagnated, and it might take

136.5 years to close the gender gap (Siddiqui, 2021). To bridge this enormous gap is a mammoth a task, for there's more to this than meets the eye. There are powerful conflicts of interest that act in opposition to such public-spirited plans and agendas. One such roadblock is the inability to reconcile varying perspectives of Islamic and secular feminism in predominantly Muslim society (Ghosh, 2008). Furthermore, exegetical analysis of the Holy Quran on marriage, divorce, and same-sex relationships has inadvertently created a vast schism in Pakistani society. The misconceiving notions about the Islamic concept of Purdah have deeply impacted the autonomy of the female gender in Pakistan. This has consequently impeded health improvements for women.

Pakistan is both a patriarchal and a patrilineal society where female is often subjugated and oppressed by the overarching patriarchal family system in which either husband or father are the head of the family (Agha, 2016). Since man has control over financial resources, females lack the autonomy to make any uncoerced choices about issues such as their own healthcare. In patriarchal societies, all such matters hinge on forces governed by factors that are determined by male heads of a family. Ideally, the principle of equity should be adopted so that the ones with the immediate need for medical attention must be treated first. In the cultural ethos of Pakistani society, the apt portrayal of feminine sensibility in linguistic terminology is the need of the hour.

### Literature Review

Discussions on taboo topics invite speakers to coin unique expressions by "promoting the creation of highly inventive and often playful new expressions or new meanings for old expressions, causing existing vocabulary to be forgone" (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 2). Allan and Burridge have further categorized these expressions into Dysphemism, X-phemism, and Orthophemism. Dysphemism has been described as unfavourable while Orthophemism is straight talk. However,

they also introduced a new term, "X-euphemism to refer to the union set of euphemisms, orthophemisms, and dysphemisms" (p. 28). It emphasized upon, 'cross varietal synonymy', that words have the same meanings but different connotations, depending upon the context in which they have been used. The aim of this research paper is to excavate subtle shades of meanings that differentiate different types of euphemistic terms from one another in the Pakistani context. Orthophemism refers to a word or a phrase that is more formal and more direct than the euphemism, while euphemisms are typical, figurative, and used in everyday speech (Allan and Burridge, 2006). In this paper, the researchers shall delineate those contexts where euphemism is interpreted as either a dysphemism, X-phemisms or orthophemism. Kate Burridge (2012) stated the following functions of taboo, "The underhand euphemism — to mystify and to misrepresent, the uplifting euphemism — to talk up and to inflate, the provocative euphemism — to reveal and to inspire, the cohesive euphemism — to show solidarity and to help define the gang and the ludic euphemism — to have fun and to entertain" (p.62).

The persistence of patriarchy and gender inequality are major topics explored within the Pakistani context. (Manzoor, 2015; Khoja, 2022) Similarly, studies have been conducted to explore the representation of women in Print Media regarding rape victim reporting (Saleem et al., 2014), projection of female electoral candidates (Tahseen, 2019), and female persona in advertisements (Iqbal et al., 2014; Saher, 2019;). A cursory glance at the research publications in Pakistan would reveal that the taboo topics have only been explored on the issues pertaining to proper disposal of feces (Khalid, 2018), spreading awareness about Sex health (Jivani & Minaz, 2019), and check the efficacy of a business model in the marketing of taboo products (Khan, 2018). While issues concerning menstruation and breasts have been deftly explored from the medicinal point of view (Baig & Karim, 2006; Khan et al. 1989), little or no research on the sociolinguistic aspect of taboo and euphemism is available. Efforts have been made to delineate taboos at a regional level, such as in

Pahiri culture ([Behzad et al., 2017](#)) and Pashtoon culture ([Ahmad et al., 2013](#)). The paucity of research on taboo expressions concerning women's issues is emblematic of the gender divide in society. This research is an endeavor to address this burgeoning schism in society.

### Research Questions

- 1) What are the different linguistic expressions used for female physiology and anatomy in Pakistani society?
- 2) Under which circumstances are euphemisms converted into either dysphemisms or orthophemisms?
- 3) How do these euphemistic statements affect the speakers' attitudes and perceptions of some taboo topics?

### Research Methodology

For this research paper, [Allan and Burridge's \(2006\)](#) model of euphemisms has been employed to differentiate between orthophemisms, and dysphemisms. Thirteen different English newspaper articles published in Dawn, Daily Times, Images, and The News International were examined in detail so that an inventory of euphemistic expressions can be drawn. The selection of data is oriented toward two major topics; menstruation and breast cancer. These newspapers have been selected for two reasons. The widely published newspapers were selected to have a variety of data for the study. Secondly, these newspapers depicted the ideas of educated elites of Pakistan who read English newspapers on a daily basis. Data has been selected and scrutinized adopting keywords as; Sharm-o-Haya (propriety), the economic factor, Najis (impure), and the uplifting euphemism.

There are a few limitations of this research project. A distinction has to be created between euphemistic dysphemisms and dysphemistic euphemisms based on prosodic features as well [Allan and Burridge's \(2006\)](#). The data for research on taboos should extend beyond the qualitative analysis of daily English newspapers of Pakistan. Instead, a mixed-method study should be conducted at a larger scale where focus group discussions and in-

depth interviews of mothers, adolescents, and teachers of different socioeconomic backgrounds should be conducted to gain an understanding of the cultural and social impacts of taboos.

### Analysis of Data

#### The Sharm-o-Haya Factor (Propriety)

Pakistan is a conservative society steeped in archaic values and norms ([Bradley & Saigol, 2012](#)). The Pakistani culture would not allow women to openly address issues concerning menstruation. In an article published in Images, the journalist interviewed a girl. She mentioned, "Till 23 when I used to live with my parents, I had to pretend fast [otherwise] my mom felt 'Baap, Bhai kya sochen ge? Very sharam ki baat' [What will your father and brother think? Very shameful.]. She also faked fasts while on her period," Dilara shared ([Raza, 2021](#)).

[Kate Burridge \(2012\)](#) has pointed out instances where "deprecation of the term euphemism" happens. She further added that "for many, it has become a pejorative label attached to language believed to be value-laden and deliberately obfuscatory" (p. 68). In this particular newspaper extract, the value-laden expression, '*Sharam ki baat*' (shameful gesture) becomes both evasive and confusing when used in reference to women's health and wellbeing. Public opinion, especially the views and opinions of male members, force women to avoid talking about their physical ailments.

Muhammad [Raza \(2021\)](#) further stated in his newspaper article:

The tiptoeing around menstruation only protects the fragile internalized misogyny which is passed down from mother to daughter; proving more damaging to women than just self-inflicted suffering — it is a loss of Self and ownership of one's body. It teaches a woman that she must choose alienation over disclosure, allow men agency of her body or be ostracized, and consequently, respect the gender hierarchy.

The implications of the word *Sharam* (*propriety*) used in this context are both misleading and damaging, for shame is not the same as guilt. The pejorative term holds women accountable for a natural biological process that is universal to all

womenfolk. [Allan and Burrige's \(2006\)](#) have regarded this as a phenomenon, “where the constraint on behaviour is imposed by someone or some physical or metaphysical force that the individual believes has authority or power over them— the law, the gods, the society in which one lives, even proprioception” (p. 9). Incidentally, the euphemism ‘*Sharam*’ for menstruation operates along the lines of dysphemism. A similar attitude is noticed when people talk about breast cancer. Instead of treating it as an illness, sociocultural stigmas stop all and sundry from talking about it. “There is resistance around the topic and we need to create awareness in both women and men to address [the issue], just like any other medical condition” (The national breast cancer, 2021). Incidentally, it is this resistance that has resulted in no or little discussion on this topic.

PMS (premenstrual syndrome) is a well-documented phenomenon. According to National Health Service (NHS) in England, the most common symptoms of PMS include mood swings feeling upset, anxious or irritable tiredness, or trouble sleeping (2018). While euphemism is regarded as the use of polite and mild-sounding words to avoid hurting the sentiments of speakers and listeners, here in the following context PMS acts as a dysphemism. “Sure, they're okay with hurling the word PMS at women every time a woman acts in a way that's ‘unacceptable’ to them

— that is, demonstrating aggression, emotion, logic or any form of an opinion, really — but they're not okay with an open conversation about a little bleeding that basically guarantees the existence of the human race ([Staff, 2016](#)). PMS here becomes an “underhand to deceive and misrepresent” ([Burrige, 2012, p.68](#)) psychological state of women. It is a well-documented and well-researched fact that women undergo mental and psychological changes during the menstrual cycle. It is ironic that euphemism employed in this context deliberately deceives the readers, operating as dysphemism in this context. It denigrates and belittles the situation rather than uplifting and alleviating women. Consider the following newspaper article:

I was told not to mention periods or if ‘caught’ drinking or eating in Ramazan, to give a reason

apart from periods. But when my brothers asked, I told them it was because of menstruation. My mother thinks my brothers and I are besharam (shameless), but between us siblings, it's normalised,” said Qurat. Fortunately, these stories are not few and far between; several women expressed that menstruation is not regarded with the typical ‘haw Haye’ in their homes ([Raza, 2021](#)).

In this specific incident, a unique household is described where both genders are comfortable in talking about menstruation. Islamic norms and values are followed here in this part of the world. The purdah is a mandatory outer garment that many females don to hide their faces from the gaze of men (especially those who are not part of their immediate circle). Unfortunately, this tendency to cloak women has greatly hampered discussion on important issues concerning their health and wellbeing. The idea that menstruation is an uncomfortable topic to discuss, a euphemism, is often used to explore the attitudes of people. Thus “Haw hayae” ([Raza, 2021](#)) becomes an alliterative expression. In fact, [Kate Burrige \(2012\)](#) labels it as a “form of distortion that renovates an offensive word” (76). Such phonological shift does more harm than favour for it is reducing a serious ailment to mere sounds only.

A thorough reading of newspapers revealed that little or no data is available on issues related to women’s physiology. It was risky to do what we did as the men of the area are not keen on women learning about these things. I went to my village a week before the session to invite women and to arrange a location. Sometimes, it was easy to convince women, but at others, it was too hard. To make it acceptable for people, I told them that it was an awareness session for women's health; otherwise, it would be next to impossible for the women to attend ([Masood, 2019](#)).

This statement inadvertently draws attention to the problems that women may encounter while talking about taboo topics. A sensitization workshop meant for underprivileged women in the remote tribal area was met with resistance. As pointed out by the writer, the real task is to use linguistic strategies where discussion of taboo topics can be initiated, resulting in societal change.

In Pakistani society, it is common for girls to do pretend fast to maintain their face and appear good in front of their male counterparts during the holy month of Ramadan. Consequently, those who refuse to adhere to the strict laws as dictated by society are regarded as indecent or shameful beings. It is noteworthy that society is responsible for indoctrinating values such as what I did is something shameful, and shame tends to be rooted in the sense of Self. Like all systems of oppression, language has inadvertently become a tool that furthers a nefarious agenda. The societal attitudes towards women's health and wellbeing are reflected in the way these topics are being discussed in newspapers:

Asma has awful menstrual pains — like someone kicking with full force on her lower belly, she says. When she shares this, the response is that every girl has to bear these things, that she just needs to take some rest. And when her father or brother is around, she should be as usual as they should not know about that silly thing happening to her ([Yasser, 2020](#)).

The expression, 'silly thing' for menstrual pain is very loaded. It is a "linguistic disguise" ([Burridge, 2012, p.68](#)) meant to dissuade the reader/listener. It is unintentionally promoting a culture of systemic sexism. Someone is labeled silly only if they are dimwits and do not behave in a socially acceptable way. In this context, a young girl must learn to put up with extreme pain, for the male members of her family cannot accept her behaving in a 'silly way.' Menstruation is often labeled as a "women's open secret" ([Shahid, 2020](#)). Many of these general-for-specific euphemisms involve the sort of linguistic restraint that is usually described as an understatement. "A special type of understatement is litotes, where the affirmative is expressed in terms of the denial of its opposite" ([Burridge, 2012, p.66](#)). The open secret is also an oxymoron where two opposing ideas are juxtaposed together to have a dramatic impact on the reader.

This gives vent to another important discussion. Women often 'borrow' phrases and expressions from Western discourse to mitigate feelings of shame and embarrassment. Mashal Khan suffering from PCOS (Polycystic Ovary Syndrome)

documented her pain and affliction in an article that was later published in Images on 10th December 2019. She said, "I would actually be relieved and not tell anyone because I thought it was easier to live without a Red Wedding taking place in my uterus" ([Khan, 2019](#)). Red wedding is a euphemistic expression that she has used for the menstrual cycle. She threw jibe and borrowed an expression from George R. R. Martin's famous novel, *Game of Thrones*, by making light of her situation. In a self-deprecating way, she wanted to relay an important issue about her physical and mental wellbeing. It is important that we consider that this expression is perhaps more common among younger generation women. In fact, it seems as if the writer has used this phrase while talking to a close friend. Keith [Allan and Burridge's \(2006\)](#) had shed light on this important tendency when they stated,

The management of social status – of power and social distance relations – involves the management of face and consequently the management of language choice. Hence the style and variety of language that the speaker uses will depend on two things: 1) the role the speaker perceives the hearer-or-named to have adopted relative to the speaker in the current situation of utterance or, if need be, on some prior occasion; 2) the speaker's communicative purpose on this present occasion; in particular, whether s/he intends to be insulting or not (p.134).

The pop-culture slang speaks volumes for the precarious position Mashal Khan enjoys in Pakistani society. She is representative of youth who is well versed in the western lingo. Despite her enlightened mindset, she is part and parcel of a society that regards *Sharam o haya (propriety)* as a distinctive feature of a perfect woman. Therefore, while she is comfortable talking about women's health, she cannot directly state things in a matter-of-fact way. It seems people often use levity to defer an awkward and unfavorable situation. Adams and Newell (1994), in the preface to their collection of jokes said, "Jokes . . . are appalling. Almost without exception, they deal in bigotry, sexism, racism, ageism, and all the other politically incorrect isms. They clearly help People deal with their deep distaste for their own sexuality and their



excremental functions" (as cited in Burrige & Benczes, 2018, p.165). In the same vein, the use of the word 'haunting' for the menstrual cycle is reflective of a similar ideology. "Are you too sick of those aunties telling you what to do or what not to do during those 'haunting days' of the month? Cause same! High five" (Ali, 2020). Humour offers a safety net by contextualizing taboo topics and encouraging women to talk candidly about topics that are often frowned upon. In these two particular instances, the words used as lexical alternatives are not very commonly used. Both these expressions not only perform a mitigating function, but both convey messages without landing the speakers in any threatening or uncomfortable situation. Such wry sarcastic humour allows speakers "the thrill of transgression: it is liberating to defy prohibition by violating linguistic taboos. There is a psychological gain in letting off steam and expressing extreme emotion through cascading expletives and forbidden words (Allan and Burrige, 2006, p 253). Incidentally, the positive and forthcoming attitudes of both the women deem it as orthophemism.

Many expressions concerning taboo topics revolve around '*Sharam o haya*' (propriety); there are other cultural constraints also which dictate a speaker's lexical choice. Within the close-knit Pakistani community, the prospect of marriage is another major issue that assails women folk. In this regard, the following observations were made about Breast Cancer in a newspaper article:

The social issues often kick in after diagnosis. We have been in touch with women who were diagnosed with advanced breast cancer and required immediate surgery, but their families were reluctant to get them treated. There are concerns that if word gets out about a mother having breast cancer, that might affect the marriage prospects of her daughters (National Breast Cancer Helpline, 2021).

The paucity of literature on the sociological and cultural impact of breast cancer in Pakistani women is a major reason no proper euphemism has been coined to address this concern. It is only in 2021 that a hotline was established to promote women to shed '*sharm-o- haya*' (propriety) and seek medical help. However, a survey of the newspaper articles reveals that the abstinence of discussion on

breast cancer has not even given vent to a milder, softer alternative to dispense with this issue. Kate Burrige (2012) stated that often a taboo expression is a "distorted" (75) version of a harsher concept. "Shortening" of a long awkward phrase is a strategy that linguists often rely upon. Within the Pakistani context, "Pinktober" (Pinktober, 2021) is a neologism that was recently coined in October 2021 to initiate a discussion on this topic.

### The Economic Factor

In a newspaper article published in a leading newspaper, the following incident was reported.

Shaan Taseer, on the other hand, equated access to pads with the illusion of problem-free menstruation. Taseer responded to the BNU protest with the claim that the English-speaking, university-going women of the Lahore bourgeois don't experience the oppression of any kind, so they have no reasons to complain (Staff, 2016).

Mr. Taseer inadvertently drew attention to a wide schism that aims to set women of rural background apart from the educated elites. He speaks on behalf of men who forget that "period-shaming cuts across class, how stains, bloating and cramps are not the sole domain of either the elite or the public at large" (Staff 2016). Manipulation of economic principles is another major deciding factor where a woman is too shy or timid to speak for herself. It is noteworthy here that omnipresent stigmatization of women's health especially related to the menstrual cycle, is prevalent in both classes of society. The deep-rooted misogyny which shuns women from speaking for the lesser privileged is apparent from the statement made here by Shaan Taseer. Karl Marx's emblematic yet profound remark that "the family relationship has been modified in the course of history by the property relationships" (Weikart 1994) particularly sheds light on how language surrounding the female reproductive system is guided by economic factors. The same applies to breast cancer, women often refuse to seek help for usually, they don't have the resources to prioritize their wellbeing and health over other members of society. It was reported in the newspaper article, that in order to get treated,

the women have to travel to bigger cities and "the whole family might have to go with her - men may have to take time off work to accompany female relatives, which means the costs add up" ([Mahmood, 2019](#)) – a scenario that particularly affects poor women from rural backgrounds.

Period Poverty is another major factor that has a debilitating impact on the discussion on issues concerning menstruation. It is an umbrella term that could mean multiple things. It is not only the unavailability of sanitary products but lack of guidance and access to education about matters about one's sexuality. In the Pakistani context, this expression is tainted with many sociocultural implications because for a woman it is virtually impossible to visit a doctor on her own for, she needs parental supervision and approval. Dr. Khwaja Ali Shahid described period poverty in the Pakistani context when he described an encounter with a patient's father: He had a distinct facial feature and was adamant in influencing the history-taking and the required physical examination of his daughter being conducted by my female colleagues. Z. Khatoon was diagnosed with recurrent Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) because of improper hygiene maintenance during her menstrual cycle. However, she would not convey to her parents the counseling that she received from the doctors at the hospital at each visit, and so her problem persisted ([Shahid, 2020](#)).

Milder expressions find sustenance in place of taboos because they cover up the underlying problems or issues. Period Poverty in this context serves a similar purpose. While this phrase facilitates social bonding between all women folk as it underpins a shared identity, unfortunately, the unique position and stance of Pakistani women are not aptly conveyed in such a simple phrase. Incidentally, in specialized situations, it serves the purpose of jargon which many illiterate Pakistani women fail to fathom. Keith Allan and Kate Burridge (2006) have elaborated that jargon might facilitate "communication among in-groupers on the one hand, on the other, they erect communication barriers that keep out-groupers out. It is, of course, out-groupers who find jargon 'abounding in uncommon or unfamiliar words, and

therefore 'unintelligible'" (66). In the Pakistani context, period poverty often operates as a dysphemism.

### Najis (Impure)

In many cultures around the globe, menstruation is often regarded as dirty or impure, and sadly the stifling silence around such practices can have a damaging impact on the health of women ([Walker, 2014](#)). The research concerning the use and role of euphemisms regarding women folk in Pakistani society revealed that many times skewed interpretations of Islamic values dictate what lexical choices we make. In the chapter, "Religious and ideologically motivated taboos" published in *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language* (2018), Keith Allan drew attention to an important aspect, "Religious taboos on the unclean govern constraints on what can be eaten and drunk, how to manage bodily effluvia, sexual behaviour, social outcasts, the sick, and the dead; they are primarily behavioral rather than linguistic" (240). He further added, "Indeed, most people using the euphemistic dysphemisms [...] are unaware of using euphemism at all. Like euphemisms everywhere, these have become ritualized and conventional behaviour" (249). Incidentally, the association of unfavourable words while describing menstruation has also become a part of ritualized behaviour. People lack awareness and do not know how to convert that euphemistic dysphemism into a euphemism only. Pakistan is no exception in this regard. Khawar Mumtaz, an expert on women's issues, points out the social ostracization of menstruating women. "In very extreme cases, women are sometimes moved to a separate quarter, and not allowed to touch food or enter the kitchen. But this is not practical because usually in rural areas it is the women who have to cook. The more common mindset is that women are dirty during this time." She further added, "The drop-out rate of young girls is highest after class 5, this is when they begin to menstruate" ([Jalil, 2018](#)). Being disbarred from acquiring education is a heavy price that young girls often have to pay when they first start menstruating. The gendered language has a great impact on the overall situation and consequently, a menstruating woman has deemed



an outcast who cannot mingle with others because she is unclean. The incorporation of the word clean and pure into the narrative has vastly to do with the misinterpretation of Islamic values and norms. Consequently, the repetitive use of such phrases allows negative connotations to reassert themselves at all times. In an article published in the leading daily newspaper Dawn, Munnazzah Raza shed light on an important phenomenon. She writes, "When a woman is menstruating in Ramazan she is exempt from participating in the rituals of the Islamic holy month, like praying and fasting, as the excretion of blood from the body is considered najis (impure)" (2021). The language used to describe menstruation shapes how denizens of Pakistan view them. Therefore, it is the need of the hour that the words one uses reiterate that it is not filth but menstruation is both normal and natural bodily function. Indeed, Islam attaches great importance to cleanliness. However, in this particular case, the teachings of Islam have been misinterpreted. While Islamic practices ordain that one must abstain from offering salaah when they have not done ablution, it never encourages society to ostracize or belittle women as impure or filthy for a specified number of days. Munnazzah Raza further elaborates that, "it is indicative of 'ritual impurity, such that a woman cannot perform some obligatory practices that Muslims have to follow, beyond which she can carry on with her daily life. This false notion lends support to other (archaic) social stigmas which cloak a woman in shame for normal bodily functions and make her feel guilt and indignity in periods" (Images, 2021).

### The Uplifting Euphemism

Taboos predominantly operate on the principle of prohibiting or forbidding members of society from engaging in a specified kind of behaviour by labeling it as 'improper' or 'unacceptable'. The major impact of research in the domain of censoring the Taboo language is to ascertain that the speaker can, through the careful use of language, affect the opinions of others in a preferred direction while refraining from employing unsavory linguistic expressions. In this regard, Kate Burridge has highlighted an important role of euphemism. "It

aims not to disguise or conceal unpleasant reality, but to help remove the stigma of negative social stereotypes by compelling its audience to go beyond the simple content of the message and challenge prejudices embodied in language" (2012). As discussed previously that in Pakistan many women-related issues are often discussed in a hushed manner. However recently, actions are being taken at a mass scale to rectify the status quo. Statistics prove that Pakistan has the highest ratio of breast cancer in Asia (Mahmood, 2019). In this regard, the government has initiated a mass drive and actions are being taken to ensure women uninhibitedly get themselves checked and examined without any fears and apprehensions. "The National Breast Cancer Helpline" was set up in 2021 with the aim to change our perception of what is normal, good, and bad. By introducing such words in our daily lives, we are encouraging people to accept them. As the erstwhile tabooed words 'breast', 'periods' and 'menses' become more familiar, they become more acceptable to those who initially found it disdainful to talk about them. Here the euphemism operates along the lines of orthophemism. Within the Pakistani Context, a detailed study of the newspapers revealed that often writers used an alliterative expression to generate positive feelings among readers. Consider following newspaper extract:

[The helpline should give] access to quality, anonymous and convenient care. [It should lead to] a safe space for women to call in and get information [that is] medically vetted and presented in a culturally sensitive way. It should [also] be run by an all-female team of nurses, doctors, mental health professionals, and pharmacists (Staff, 2021).

The focus on the words such as "safe place" for "culturally sensitive" females highlights how the linguistic choices can leave a positive impact on all and sundry. Here a taboo topic is addressed in a very non-specific and discreet way. Similarly consider the following excerpt from the article published in Daily Times, "In June, HER Pakistan went to Rehri Goth and met 35 amazing women. We talked about menstrual hygiene management and created a safe space for these women to speak openly about the challenges they face" (HER, 2018). The non-profit

organization was consumed with the idea that women must prioritize their health over everything else. The phrase 'safe space' enhances one's sense of security. Consequently, this would elicit willingness in the female gender to openly discuss matters about their health without feeling ill at ease. The pink ribbon is an international symbol of breast cancer awareness (Pinkrober, 2021). By wearing a pink ribbon, one expresses solidarity with those who suffered because of breast cancer. The pink ribbon acts as a euphemism that draws awareness and reduces the stigma of breast cancer. All the uplifting euphemisms fall under the category of orthophemism, for these terms very directly and matter-of-factly, urge women to seek medical help without shame.

## **Conclusion**

This paper not only investigates different kinds of linguistic taboos employed by people but the study is also pivotal in shedding light on the Pakistani culture, norms, and belief systems. A detailed study of the sample newspaper articles revealed that the euphemisms concerning feminine hygiene and health care often tend to operate along with the following major domains: the sharm-o-haya factor (propriety), the economic factor, najis (impure), and the uplifting euphemism. The study asserted that taboos not only mask offensiveness, they often connote various emotions, from anger and exasperation to macabre humour and aspiration. Euphemistic expressions used for female physiology fall into both categories of orthophemism and

dysphemism interchangeably. In certain contexts, dysphemisms replaced euphemisms, while on other occasions, orthophemisms were used to give off positive feelings. Although this research paper highlighted scatological and body taboos' multiple facets and features, it is important to reiterate that languages construct identities. The research paper deftly explored how the use of euphemistic expressions varies among older and younger females. The older generation was invested in upholding propriety, while the younger lot spoke uninhibitedly and candidly. Similarly, the urban-rural divide also determined the linguistic choices of females. The detailed analysis of newspapers revealed that women from lesser privileged backgrounds chose to remain anonymous while talking to newspaper correspondents on the contrary the educated lot did not hesitate in sharing their names and biodatas. Often, the young educated girls employed references from pop culture to refer to female physiology. The independent and self-reliant females have taken it upon themselves to introduce inclusive terminology like HER (a non-governmental organization) to delineate the cause of females. The detailed analysis revealed that powerful and dominant groups perpetuate those value-laden expressions which further their agendas. In the same vein, stigmas around menstruation and breasts, are reflective of deep-rooted forms of misogyny and neglect. The matter concerning a discussion on taboo terms is not an exception in this regard. The paper also argued how dominating social discourses such as newspapers shape different taboo expressions.

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