

Constructing the 'Other' in Times of Crisis: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Pakistani Media Narratives on the Repatriation of Afghan Refugees (Jan-June 2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how mainstream Pakistani media constructs narratives around Afghan refugees during the forced repatriation period of January–June 2025. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which views discourse as a practice operating at textual, discursive, and socio-cultural levels where language reflects and shapes power relations, the research examines English-language newspapers (Dawn, The News) and Urdu-language dailies (Jang, Dunya) to uncover underlying ideological biases and power structures that shape public perception. The selected texts were gathered through purposive sampling of relevant news stories, editorials, and opinion pieces. Each text was closely examined across textual, discursive, and socio-political dimensions to identify patterns of representation. The analysis reveals systematic "othering" of Afghan refugees through linguistic strategies, temporal distancing, and systematic exclusion of refugee voices. Findings demonstrate how media discourse functions as a tool of exclusion while legitimizing state policies during humanitarian crises. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how discursive choices contribute to constructing public narratives. Ultimately, the study highlights the media's influential role in reinforcing dominant state ideologies under the guise of neutral reporting.

Keywords: Afghan refugees, Critical Discourse Analysis, media representation, othering, Pakistan, forced repatriation

INTRODUCTION

Since the Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan has found itself at the center of one of the world's largest and longest-running refugee crises. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023), Pakistan is dealing with the issue of more than 2.8 million Afghan refugees. Building on this foundation, Pakistan has hosted wave after wave of Afghan refugees, first fleeing the Soviet conflict as pointed out by Hussain et al. (2023) and Hafeez et al. (2021), then the United States-led war that began in 2001, and more recently the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

Afghan refugees have over these four decades become part of the social and economic fabric of Pakistan. They have set up enterprises in urban areas, helped in agricultural production, occupied the labor market gaps and most importantly brought up generations of children who have never known any other

homeland. In this vein, despite these contributions, Khan (2024) recognizes how Pakistani media discourse does not only celebrate Pakistani traditional hospitality but also expresses justifiable concerns about national security issues, and regrettably, in some cases, reinforces refugees as burdens instead of assets.

This multifaceted story took a new twist as repatriation campaigns started between 2023 and 2025. According to Ahmed (2025), forced repatriation of Afghan refugees over the period 2023-2025 has escalated these discourses as he believes that media outlets have been instrumental in molding the opinions of the people through their selective coverage and ideological stance. Whereas some accounts are more humanitarian in nature, others consider Afghan refugees as an economic burden or a security threat to the nation of Pakistan.

The fact concerning this prolonged stay is that the Afghan refugees have made Pakistan their permanent home because they have been able to marry Pakistani nationals and acquire the Pakistani nationality through different ways. However, their permanency in the country is a major challenge to the future stability of Pakistan and its relations with Afghanistan since in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), there have been tensions over allegations that the Afghanis disrupt the peace of the province since they engage in crimes such as kidnapping and murder. However, research challenges these perceptions as Schmeidl (2002) noted that refugees weren't the only ones who were solely responsible for these crimes. More revealing, as Batool (2019) claims that investigations showed only 1.3% of refugees were actually involved in crimes, and it was also discovered that the KPK government had charged false cases against refugees.

According to Batool (2019), refugee integration in Pakistan has been substantial. By 2014, 51% of refugees were Pakistani-born, with many building strong social and cultural ties. Large numbers have also established businesses in sectors such as transport, carpet weaving, and the gem industry, reflecting a perception of Pakistan as their permanent home. Batool (2019) further asserts that Pakistan has hosted over 5 million Afghan refugees, though approximately 3.8 million have repatriated and many have plans of exclusion. Currently, as Batool (2019) further states that around 3 million registered and unregistered Afghan refugees remain in Pakistan, and they are exerting pressure on the economy and posing potential security threats, particularly due to alleged associations with militant groups.

Compounding these challenges, the burden grew heavier when international support vanished. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 triggered massive refugee influx into Pakistan and initially Pakistan got support from international aid, but after 1989 when the war was over, global funding declined too, and Pakistan was left alone to bear the long-term burden (Hafeez et al., 2024; Khan & Hayat, 2021; Siddiqi, 2022).

Given this complex backdrop, this study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how mainstream Pakistani media, particularly English and Urdu-language newspapers that are widely read nationwide construct narratives around the Afghan refugee crisis. By focusing on the period of forced repatriation between January and June 2025, the research examines not only how Afghan refugees are portrayed in the press but also the broader socio-political implications of these representations. Through a close reading of news reports and editorials, the study aims to uncover the underlying ideological biases and power structures that shape public perception and influence state policies regarding Afghan refugees.

To achieve this, a comparative media analysis was conducted using a selection of Pakistan's most widely read and influential newspapers: *Dawn*, *The News*, and two major Urdu-language dailies, *Jang* and

Dunya. These newspapers were selected for their diverse editorial stances and broad readership. While *Dawn* has a reputation for its balanced reporting and liberal tone, *The News* is famous for comprehensive national and international coverage. On the other hand, *Jang* and *Dunya* often reflect more populist and nationalist perspectives, which makes them particularly valuable for a comparative analysis of discourse.

Objectives

In line with these research questions, the study pursues the following specific objectives:

- a) To analyze the print media discourses surrounding Afghan refugees in Pakistani print media during the forced repatriation process (January–June 2025)
- b) To uncover the hidden power dynamics and ideological constructs embedded within print media representations of Afghan refugees

Research Questions

Against this theoretical and contextual backdrop, this study is guided by the following main research questions:

- a) How do Pakistani mainstream newspapers frame the identity of Afghan refugees in the context of forced repatriation (January–June 2025)?
- b) What ideological constructs and power structures are embedded within media discourses on Afghan refugees in Pakistan?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historical context of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations is crucial to provide essential background for understanding contemporary media narratives surrounding Afghan refugees. Pakistan and Afghanistan share bilateral relations that have experienced significant ups and downs since Pakistan's inception, as documented by the International Crisis Group (2014), Sial (2011), and Siddiqi (2008). These scholars highlight that the relationship between these neighboring countries has been marked by great fluctuations throughout their shared history that can be seen as a foundation of mistrust that influences current discourse.

The path to a good relationship between the two countries has never been smooth; it has been a bumpy ride due to multiple conflicting issues. Qaseem (2008) identifies the 2,250-kilometer-long unsettled Durand Line as a root cause of tension between the two countries. Both Gul (2012) and Qaseem (2008) highlight allegations of extremist infiltration and cross-border terrorism from both sides of the border, while the International Crisis Group (2014) further emphasizes these cross-border security concerns as seemingly never-ending challenges. Due to these security-focused narratives, Afghan refugees are often viewed with suspicion rather than humanitarian concern.

The role of media in shaping public understanding of these complex relations between two countries becomes important in times of crisis. We find extensive research on Pakistan-Afghanistan ties and their historical background, but Mushtaq and Baig (n.d.) observe that media's role in these relations has been addressed by very few studies. Media's power in constructing the 'Other' draws from established communication theories. For instance, the influence of media on any country's foreign policy is conceptualized through what is known as the CNN effect. Livingstone (1997) explains this theory,

arguing that according to the CNN effect, media can function as an accelerant to policy decision-making, serve as an impediment to achieving policy goals, and most importantly, act as a policy agenda-setting agent. This theoretical foundation becomes particularly relevant when we examine how media narratives can construct Afghan refugees as the 'Other' during repatriation periods.

Lippman (1922) provides foundational understanding by arguing that people get information about the realities of the world without directly experiencing them, thus generating public opinion about distant 'Others.' Entman (2005) explains that media presents news in such a way that helps to achieve desired meanings through strategic presentation, a process central to constructing particular identities for refugee populations. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) assert that when media uses certain frames, desired attitude change is brought about in people, and this desired attitude change enables the construction of Afghan refugees as legitimate targets for repatriation policies.

Contemporary research reveals how these theoretical frameworks manifest in practice during repatriation crises. Within the specific context of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Batool (2019) states that Pakistani media's portrayal has been shaped by political, social, and economic dynamics that often reflect state interests and security concerns. Batool (2019) demonstrates that over decades of forced migration, Afghan refugees have been constructed not merely as displaced persons but as subjects who are embedded in complex discourses of security, criminality, and national identity that we can say a classic mechanisms of 'Othering.'

The discourse analysis perspective reveals specific mechanisms of 'Othering' in media representations. Batool (2019) sheds light on another critical issue: the exclusion of Afghan voices from mainstream media discourse. She claims that Afghan refugees are rarely quoted or interviewed in reports, particularly those concerning them, so this denies them agency and makes them voiceless, powerless 'Others.' Hassan (2021) writes that linguistic choices within headlines such as "illegal migrants" or "security threat" further dehumanize this large group, demonstrating how language serves as a tool for creating 'Othering.'

Hassan (2021) emphasizes that language, power, and ideology are central to media constructions of Afghan refugees. Hassan (2021) highlights how state narratives have framed Afghan refugees as a burden rather than focusing on humanitarian concerns. This framing process demonstrates how the 'Other' is constructed through economic and social threat narratives that justify exclusion.

Research Gaps and Study Contribution

These studies underscore the urgent need to incorporate refugee voices in media narratives and challenge dominant state-centered discourses. Without such shifts, Afghan refugees in Pakistan will continue to be constructed through lenses of fear, suspicion, and exclusion, rather than empathy, justice, and rights.

Despite the valuable contributions of these scholars, significant gaps remain in the existing literature that this study aims to address. While Batool (2019) and Hassan (2021) have examined media representation of Afghan refugees, there is limited research that employs critical discourse analysis to examine how Pakistani media specifically constructs the 'Other' during mass repatriation drives. Furthermore, existing literature lacks comprehensive critical discourse analysis of how linguistic choices, framing strategies, and narrative structures work together to construct Afghan refugees as the 'Other.' The theoretical frameworks provided by Entman (2005), Lippman (1922), McCombs et al. (1997), and Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) offer important foundations for understanding media influence, but their application to critical discourse analysis of 'Othering' processes during exclusion crises remains underexplored. This

research gap requires a focused critical discourse analysis to examine how Pakistani media narratives construct Afghan refugees as the 'Other' during the specific crisis period of January–June 2025, which will contribute to understanding how media discourse functions as a tool of exclusion and legitimizes state policies during humanitarian crises.

METHODOLOGY

This study analyzes newspaper articles from four major Pakistani publications spanning January–June 2025: *Dawn* and *The News* (English-language), and *Dunya News* and *Jang* (Urdu-language). These publications represent diverse ideological positions and readership demographics that provide comprehensive coverage of Pakistani media discourse.

The focus on the January to June 2025 period highlights the key phase after the December 2024 repatriation deadline expired. During these six months, the actual enforcement of policies took shape, international reactions emerged, and public conversations around the issue evolved. This timeframe offers valuable insight into how the language and narratives around repatriation shifted in response to unfolding events.

Guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the analysis focuses on language use in the text, how narratives and voices are constructed and connected, and the wider social and ideological forces that shape and are shaped by the discourse.

ANALYSIS

Textual Analysis: Linguistic Construction of the Afghan 'Other'

Lexical Choices and Semantic Fields

The analysis highlights clear differences in the language English and Urdu newspapers use to describe Afghan refugees. As far as the language in *Dawn* is concerned, it combines bureaucratic and humanitarian tones, which portrays Fairclough's (1989) concept of "synthetic personalization," where empathy is conveyed without genuine personal engagement. For example, the February 5, 2025 article states:

"The government has devised a plan to move registered Afghan refugees out of Islamabad and Rawalpindi."

Here we see that the verb "move" indirectly obscures the coercive nature of repatriation, while "devised a plan" suggests rational, more administrative action rather than forced migration.

This language serves a dual purpose: firstly, it constructs an image of state authority as orderly and justified, secondly, it quietly silences the suffering of Afghan refugees. The phrase "move registered Afghan refugees" shows the act of deportation in terms of bureaucratic management. This reflects what Fairclough (1993) calls "technologization," where formal, bureaucratic language conceals ethical concerns beneath a neutral tone.

The News amplifies crisis rhetoric more often, as we see in the June 5, 2025 headline:

"Pakistan sees exodus of 200,000 Afghans since crackdown began."

The term "exodus" carries biblical connotations of mass departure but the passive structure of the sentence masks the fact that Pakistani authorities are driving the deportations. If we look at the word "crackdown" it clearly suggests here the pressure from the state, and this pressure is seen as necessary and fair, not as something that causes suffering.

The idea of refugees being a burden is a common theme in English-language reporting. As we see in *The News*, it repeatedly emphasizes numerical scales; "200,000 Afghans," "800,000 Afghans," "one million Afghans" that employ what Richardson (2007) terms "quantification rhetoric" to overwhelm readers with the supposed magnitude of the refugee presence. So this emphasis on numbers which turn people into statistics, that help in justifying their removal without acknowledging their individual human experiences.

Urdu newspapers employ multiple, overlapping strategies to differentiate and marginalize through 'othering.' *Dunya News* uses nostalgic discourse to justify contemporary repatriation, as its March analysis portrays:

"ایک زمانہ تھا جب پاکستان میں بازو پھیلا کر ان مہاجرین کا استقبال کیا جاتا تھا"

(There was a time when these refugees were welcomed with open arms in Pakistan).

The gap between past and present creates what Schwenkel (2009) calls "imagined nostalgia" that is based on constructing an idealized past to justify present exclusion. The Urdu phrase "مہاجرین" (muhajirin) carries specific Islamic historical resonance, it refers to Prophet Muhammad's companions who migrated from Mecca to Medina. This religious terminology initially dignifies Afghan refugees by connecting them to sacred Islamic history. However, *Dunya News* systematically changes its stance from historical Islamic hospitality with contemporary security concerns:

نومبر 2022ء کے بعد کالعدم ٹی ٹی پی کی طرف سے جنگ بندی کے خاتمے کے اعلان کے بعد سے یہ مہاجرین پاکستان کے "لیے سکیورٹی رسک بن چکے ہیں"

(After the banned TTP's announcement of ending the ceasefire in November 2022, these refugees have become a security risk for Pakistan).

This linguistic strategy serves two important roles: it preserves Pakistani Islamic identity as hospitable while it also proves justification for expulsion. The transformation of "muhajirin" from honored guests to "security risks" clearly mirrors broader discursive transformation from hospitality to exclusion.

The *Jang* newspaper uses official labels to treat Afghans as outsiders, it clearly separates them into different levels or groups:

چودہ لاکھ افغان مہاجرین قانونی طور پر رجسٹرڈ ہیں، جبکہ آٹھ لاکھ افغان شہری ایسے ہیں جن کے پاس افغان سٹیزن کارڈ موجود ہے، مگر اب ان کے قیام کو غیر قانونی تصور کیا جا رہا ہے۔

(1.4 million Afghan refugees are legally registered, 800,000 Afghan citizens hold Afghan Citizen Cards but their stay is now considered illegal).

This labeling system applies what Foucault (1977) terms "disciplinary power" which is creating administrative knowledge that enables control. The phrase "اب غیر قانونی تصور کیا جا رہا ہے" (now considered illegal) shows that legal labels are not always fair (as once they were registered but now they must go), even though they seem official or real. The passive construction of the sentence obscures who is doing the "considering," naturalizing state power to redefine legal status.

Grammatical Analysis: Agency and Passivization

The way sentences are written shows regular patterns in how responsibility is given or hidden across the whole set of texts. English newspapers frequently employ passive voice when they are describing Pakistani state actions, contrasting they frequently use active voice for Afghan actions or international criticism.

Dawn's February 5 article demonstrates this pattern:

"More than 800 Afghan nationals, among them women and children, have been deported so far this year from Islamabad and Rawalpindi alone."

The passive construction "have been deported" removes the clear control of authorities and portrays that deportation happens to Afghans rather than something Pakistani authorities do to them. This grammatical choice serves what Thompson (1990) identifies as the "reification" function of ideology that is presenting social arrangements as normal and beyond change.

Conversely, when Afghan actions are described, we see consistent use of active voice by English newspapers:

"Afghan nationals of various documentation statuses were being rounded up" becomes, in the same article, "reports said Afghan nationals...were being rounded up."

The action is given to "reports" rather than to Pakistani authorities that shows a pattern of grammatical bias against Afghans.

Urdu newspapers demonstrate different patterns, they often employ direct active voice when they are describing Pakistani state actions:

"حکومت نے آج سے ان کی بے دخلی کے عمل کا آغاز کر دیا ہے"

(The government has initiated the process of their eviction from today).

This directness is clearly presenting Pakistani state power as legitimate and decisive rather than masking it through passive constructions.

However, Urdu newspapers also employ passive voice whenever they have to describe potentially controversial aspects of policy implementation:

"غیر قانونی افغان شہریوں کے خلاف کارروائی کی جا رہی ہے"

(Action is being taken against illegal Afghan citizens). The passive "کارروائی کی جا رہی ہے" (action is being taken) obscures who are the specific actors who are doing the action and what are particular methods, so all this passiveness allows readers to imagine benign administrative processes rather than forced displacement.

Modality and Epistemic Positioning

Modal analysis highlights the stance newspapers take in when expressing certainty, doubt, or obligation about refugee policy. If we talk about English newspapers, they frequently employ hedging and uncertainty markers when they discuss policy consequences:

"Forced return to Afghanistan could place some people at increased risk" (Dawn, February 5).

Here the modal "could" and hedge "some people" make the harm less certain while still seeming to care about people.

The News employs similar hedging:

"This may affect around four million of the more than six million Afghans who Iran says are in the country" (June 5)

Here words like "may" and "says" make the facts seem unsure, which lets readers doubt how big or serious the refugee crisis really is.

But if we see Urdu newspapers, they demonstrate higher modal certainty regarding policy implementation:

"جنہیں رواں سال غیر قانونی مقیم غیر ملکیوں کی بے دخلی پلان کے تحت واپس بھیجا جائے گا"

(who will be sent back this year under the illegal resident foreigners' eviction plan).

The definitive future tense "بھیجا جائے گا" (will be sent back) expresses sheer certainty about policy implementation.

This modal difference reflects different readership positioning: English newspapers focus more on international humanitarian discourse expectations while Urdu newspapers engage with domestic audiences who assumed to support repatriation policies.

Discursive Practice: Intertextuality and Knowledge Construction

Intertextuality Appropriation and Authority Construction

The analysis reveals the strategic adoption of authoritative discourses across newspaper languages and ideological positions. *Dawn* is quite frequent in using international humanitarian law discourse, and generously cites UNHCR and IOM statements to establish moral authority:

"UNHCR and IOM are especially concerned for Afghan nationals who may face a risk of harm upon return, such as ethnic and religious minorities, women and girls, journalists, human rights activists."

This intertextuality strategy which is used here serves dual functions: it frames *Dawn's* position as internationally informed and humanitarian while indirectly criticizing Pakistani policy. However, what we see that the newspaper carefully avoids direct confrontation with state authority, instead it has used international voices to express criticism while positioning itself as neutral.

Quoting the UN also helps show what Bakhtin (1981) terms "heteroglossia" that is the coexistence of multiple voices within single texts. So heteroglossia in *Dawn's* articles contain not only Pakistani official voices, but also UN humanitarian voices, and journalistic narration as well.

If we closely look at *The News*, it employs different intertextual strategies, as we see frequent incorporating of legal and administrative discourse:

"Pakistan has set a June 30 deadline for the voluntary return of registered Afghan nationals, including those holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards" (April 25).

The technical terminology "Proof of Registration (PoR) cards" resonates with bureaucratic discourse to legitimize state action of setting deadline.

The phrase "voluntary return" indicates sophisticated intertextual manipulation. This linguistic strategy employs what Gramsci (1971) terms "transformism" that is the adoption of oppositional language while maintaining hegemonic positions.

Urdu newspapers primarily employ Islamic and nationalist discourses. *Dunya News* extensively cites historical precedent and Islamic hospitality traditions:

"پاکستان میں بازو پھیلا کر ان مہاجرین کا استقبال کیا جاتا تھا"

(These refugees were welcomed with open arms in Pakistan).

The connection to history, as a start, is used to show Pakistan in a good light before justifying current deportations.

Jang demonstrates the incorporation of sophisticated legal discourse:

"ڈیڈ لائن ختم ہونے کے بعد غیر قانونی غیر ملکیوں کی وطن واپسی کا دوسرا مرحلہ شروع ہو گیا ہے"

(After deadline given ended, the second phase of illegal foreigners' repatriation has begun).

This complex intertextual construction deploys administrative discourse ("second phase"), and legal discourse ("deadline," "illegal foreigners"), all these are set to create authoritative justification for coercive policies.

Voice Representation and Perspective Management

What is the most common across all newspapers is systematic marginalization of Afghan perspectives. English newspapers primarily represent Afghan voices through international intermediaries rather than direct quoting them. *Dawn* uses UNHCR officials narratives speaking for Afghans:

"More than 800 Afghan nationals, among them women and children, have been deported" excluding Afghan testimonies about deportation experiences.

Afghan voices seldom reach us directly; more often they come routed through outside filters:

"Those he met also underscored their desire to continue to live in Pakistan as well as eventually in Afghanistan" (Dawn, April 26)

This indirect reporting obscures specific Afghan concerns.

The News similarly marginalizes Afghan agency:

"Generations of Afghans have fled to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran during decades of successive wars, seeking safety and better economic opportunities."

This framing makes Afghan migration seem automatic as result of war, not a choice, and portrays Afghans as passive victims of history.

Urdu newspapers Afghan voices are almost entirely missing, as these newspapers focus more on Pakistani official and expert perspectives. *Jang* brings extensive governmental statistics and policy explanations without the inclusion of any Afghan responses to these policies. This voice exclusion employs what Spivak (1988) terms "epistemic violence" that is denying subaltern groups the right to speak for themselves.

Dunya News though occasionally acknowledges Afghan perspectives but in such a way that are not taken seriously:

"میڈیا اطلاعات کے مطابق ان افغان باشندوں کی بڑی تعداد افغانستان واپس جانا چاہتی"

(According to media reports, a large number of these Afghan residents do not want to return to Afghanistan).

The phrase "media reports" distances the newspaper from Afghan desires.

Social Practice: Ideological Positioning and Power Relations

Competing Ideological Frameworks

The analysis suggests newspapers are walking a fine line between different beliefs. Humanitarian internationalism put more focus on universal human rights and international legal obligations. While Islamic hospitality traditions stress more on religious obligations to assist refugees and migrants. On the

other hand Nationalist sovereignty discourse see state security and demographic control at core. And Economic pragmatism focuses on resource constraints and development priorities.

English newspapers tossed between humanitarian internationalism and nationalist sovereignty. *Dawn* on one hand, attempts to maintain humanitarian credibility while on the other embracing the sovereignty arguments:

"both organisations recognised that the state chose to limit freedom of movement for foreigners, including refugees, however, they urged the government to implement any relocation measures with due consideration for human rights standards."

"However." Creates a bridge between state sovereignty rights and humanitarian critique. The phrase "limit freedom of movement for foreigners" clearly demonstrates accepting state authority over "foreigners" but notably not "refugees" or "people."

The News more directly accepts nationalist frameworks:

"Just like Pakistanis follow immigration rules abroad, Afghan citizens must also abide by our laws here".

This reciprocity argument suggests that equal treatment requires Afghan compliance with Pakistani law regardless of refugee status.

Urdu newspapers navigate tension between Islamic hospitality and nationalist security more openly. *Dunya News* explicitly addresses this tension:

افغان مہاجرین اور ان کے ذریعے سابقہ حکومتوں کی سیاسی مقاصد حاصل کرنے کی پالیسی کی سخت مخالفت کی گئی ہے، اور "اب انہی مہاجرین کو ملک سے نکالنے کی مخالفت کی جا رہی ہے۔"

(having strongly opposed previous governments' policy of achieving political objectives through Afghan refugees, [they] are now opposing the expulsion of refugees from the country).

This passage reveals political objectives behind refugee inclusion which were not humanitarian ones. It was politically motivated rather than genuinely hospitable.

Jang deals with opposing ideas by separating them into different categories: it focuses on distinguishing between "legal" refugees who deserve continued protection and those "illegal" migrants which are subject to expulsion. This categorization system preserves Islamic hospitality discourse for legitimate refugees while excluding others:

چودہ لاکھ افغان مہاجرین قانونی طور پر رجسٹرڈ ہیں، جبکہ آٹھ لاکھ افغان شہری ایسے ہیں جن کے قیام کو اب غیر قانونی تصور "کیا جا رہا ہے۔"

(1.4 million Afghan refugees are legally registered, whereas 800,000 Afghan citizens are now considered to be staying illegally).

Identity Construction and Boundary Maintenance

Pakistani identity thorough moral authority along with justification for this exclusionary practice is what revealed. English newspapers construct Pakistani identity through international recognition and humanitarian tradition acknowledgment. As *Dawn* cites UNHCR representative:

"Pakistan has a proud tradition of hosting refugees, saving millions of lives. This generosity is greatly appreciated."

This identity construction maintains what Anderson (2006) terms "imagined community" maintenance that is preserving positive national self-perception despite of exclusionary policies. The phrase "proud tradition" suggests how refugees were treated and how they will be, it clearly indicates the continuity between past hospitality and present actions, while "greatly appreciated" provides international validation from different foreign agencies.

Urdu newspapers are more direct in cultural and religious identity construction. *Dunya News* talks about Islamic hospitality traditions:

پاکستان میں بازو پھیلا کر ان مہاجرین کا استقبال کیا جاتا تھا اور افغانستان کے کونے کونے سے لاکھوں کی تعداد میں افغان "باشندے...پاکستان میں داخل ہو رہے تھے"

(These refugees were welcomed with open arms and hundreds of thousands of Afghan residents from every corner of Afghanistan were entering Pakistan).

The phrase "کونے کونے سے" (from every corner) suggests "generous victimization", that Pakistani hospitality attracted not only genuine refugees who were vulnerable but it also catered opportunistic migrants, so Pakistan is justifiable for current restrictive policies.

The newspaper extends this identity construction through sacrifice discourse:

اس کا مقصد پاکستان میں بہتر حالات اور بہتر مواقع پیدا کر کے افغانستان سے زیادہ سے زیادہ لوگوں کو ملک چھوڑنے پر راغب "کرنا تھا"

(The purpose was to create better conditions and opportunities in Pakistan to encourage as many people as possible to leave Afghanistan).

This passage reveals Pakistani contribution in Cold War strategy along with its generous help for Afghan welfare.

Power Relations and Hegemonic Maintenance

The discursive practices identified serve what Gramsci (1971) has coined the term as "hegemonic maintenance" that is preserving dominant group authority through consent rather than coercion. English newspapers maintain hegemony by first critically examining the policy while eventually accepting its premises. *Dawn* shows its concern on humanitarian level and accepts state sovereignty arguments as well. UNHCR and IOM concerns are presented as technical recommendations rather than fundamental challenges to exclusion policy.

The News supports hegemonic control through its framing of power relations as mutually beneficial:

"Just like Pakistanis follow immigration rules abroad, Afghan citizens must also abide by our laws here."

This statement normalizes exclusionary practices by suggesting it as fair treatment rather than discriminatory enforcement.

Urdu newspapers maintain hegemony through historical inevitability discourse. *Dunya News* presents current policy as a result of changed circumstances rather than political choice:

افغانستان میں طالبان انتظامیہ کے تحت پیدا کردہ حالات، خصوصاً لڑکیوں کی تعلیم اور ملازمت پر پابندی کو بھی مدنظر رکھنے کی ضرورت ہے

(It is necessary to consider the conditions created under the Taliban administration in Afghanistan, especially restrictions on girls' education and employment).

This discourse suggests that Pakistani policy responds to what is happening in Afghan circumstances rather than serving Pakistani interests. The reference to Taliban restrictions on women allows Pakistani authorities to appear progressive while giving more focus on implementing exclusionary policies to tackle the issue that shows the moral and authoritative side of Pakistani policy.

Jang maintains hegemony through administrative rationality discourse. *Jang* focuses on presenting complex categorization systems as objective necessities rather than political constructions:

دوسری قسم وہ افغان باشندے ہیں جن کو افغان سٹیزن کارڈز جاری کیے گئے اور وہ رجسٹرڈ غیر قانونی طور پر مقیم افغان شہری "تصور ہوتے ہیں"

(The second type are those Afghan residents who were issued Afghan Citizen Cards and are considered registered illegally resident Afghan citizens).

This bureaucratic discourse "تصور ہوتے ہیں" (are considered) reveals the constructed nature of legal categories and objective reality.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of all four major newspapers reveals how crisis periods activate what might be termed "temporal othering." What we see clearly that all newspapers employ temporal distancing strategies that separate contemporary exclusionary policies from the historical hospitality traditions of the country. The discourse suggests that due to changed circumstances policy reversal was implemented (from traditional hospitality to exclusion).

English newspapers portray this temporal othering through circumstantial change discourse. *Dawn* focuses more on changed international contexts:

"Since the start of the year, an uptick in arrests of Afghan nationals...caused significant distress." This framing presents current policies as responses to new changes in circumstances rather than fundamental reorientation.

Urdu newspapers are more direct in depicting historical narratives that construct inevitable progression from hospitality to exclusion. For instance, *Dunya News* tells a story starting from the Soviet invasion to today's crisis leading naturally to the next steps. This makes it seem like the current exclusion of refugees had to happen and was not really a choice.

On the other hand, English newspapers often cite international bodies like UNHCR and IOM, while Urdu newspapers rely on local officials, Islamic references, and historical examples.

The analysis reveals significant differences between English and Urdu newspaper discourses that reflect broader language politics. English newspapers operate within international discourse expectations and also support state policy through subtle linguistic strategies which include passive voice, hedging, and expert legitimization.

Urdu newspapers address domestic audiences and they are more direct to support repatriation policies. They employ nationalist and Islamic frameworks more explicitly (particularly Islamic hospitality traditions).

Systematic analysis reveals what Fricker (2007) terms "epistemic injustice" that is the denial of marginalized groups' capacity to provide knowledge about their own experiences. This epistemic injustice is so obvious in all the newspapers that we see that Afghan voices are systematically excluded, creating what Spivak (1988) identifies as conditions where "the subaltern cannot speak."

Deliberately leaving out Afghan voices serves an important purpose; it makes it hard to question current policies. When Afghan views are included, they are usually filtered through Pakistani or international sources. So Afghans seem like passive subjects of policy, not people with their own opinions, knowledge, or rights. As a result, it becomes easier to justify exclusion and harder for others to relate to their experiences or imagine different solutions except to accept what is going on.

CONCLUSION

This Critical Discourse Analysis through Fairclough's three-dimensional model reveals how Pakistani media systematically constructs Afghan refugees as the 'Other' during the 2025 repatriation crisis through sophisticated linguistic, discursive, and ideological strategies. The analysis demonstrates several key findings:

During crisis periods, like the 2025 repatriation of Afghan refugees, what we see through media narratives existing patterns of discrimination and exclusion become more visible and intense, all while still claiming to protect national identity. In this context, Pakistani media uses different strategies for different audiences: English newspapers use humanitarian language to appear globally responsible but still support exclusionary policies of government, while Urdu newspapers rely on cultural and religious ideas to justify the same actions while supporting this exclusion as legitimate. Another key finding is the use of temporal othering, where the current situation is portrayed as very different from the past. This allows policies to change without making it seem like Pakistan's core values have changed. We also don't see Afghan voices that seem to be silenced by media. Refugees are shown as passive subjects of policy, not as people with opinions, rights, or knowledge. Lastly, the idea of hospitality is shown to be conditional and primarily political. Past kindness is reframed as serving Pakistan's national interests rather than based on true humanitarian values. This helps justify new exclusionary actions as practical decisions not moral failings to send Afghans back to their country.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study looks only at mainstream newspapers, so it may miss alternative or opposing views found in social media, civil society work, or refugee-led media. Future research should explore these spaces to see how dominant stories are questioned or replaced.

The study also focuses just on the crisis period (January–June 2025). Comparing it with media from before or during past refugee crises could give a better picture of how these narratives change over time.

Finally, this research analyzes how refugees are shown in the media but doesn't look at how people suffer and think about it. Future studies should explore how readers understand, **accept, or challenge these media portrayals.**

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Corpus Details

Dawn Newspaper Articles

- "UNHCR, IOM concerned about plan to move Afghan refugees out of capital" (February 5, 2025)
- "UNHCR urges world to share responsibility of Afghan refugees" (April 26, 2025)

The News Articles

- "Pakistan sees exodus of 200,000 Afghans since crackdown began" (June 5, 2025)
- "Registered Afghan refugees told to exit Pakistan by June 30 or face deportation" (April 25, 2025)