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Iranian Marriage Proposal (*Khaastgaari*) in Light of Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

As opposed to western cultures, marriage proposal in Iran takes place in a formal family-gathering called *Khaastgaari* ceremony and develops through negotiations between the prospective couples' families. There are embedded factors that invisibly control these negotiations; thus, word choices and behaviors of participants mirror the invisible sources of domination that govern these negotiations. Drawing on the definition of discourse as *any meaningful symbolic behavior*, this study aims to probe into the deep layers of discursal exchanges in *Khaastgaari* events and address the salient sociocultural sources of domination that govern this ancient Iranian tradition. The data obtained from observation of typical *Khaastgaari* events were analyzed through a thematic analysis and interpreted in light of insights gleaned from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The findings revealed that discursal exchanges in *Khaastgaari* events represent the traditional superiority of family and parents over children and also reproduce dominant gender relations in Iranian social life. Besides, seeking prestige and observance of religious norms are other sources of sociocultural prescription for participants' discursal moves.

Keywords: Khaastgaari, discourse, critical discourse analysis, domination

1. Introduction

Marriage proposal is an event where one person in a relationship asks for the other's hand in marriage. If accepted, it marks the initiation of engagement and the rise of a new family. In western cultures, marriage proposal is often an

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informal and private matter which involves presentation of an engagement ring and asking a question such as ‘Will you marry me?’ (Bailey, 1988; Cate & Lloyd, 1992). The traditional perceived role of a male to court or woo a female at present has lost its importance and rigidity in many western societies and now it is common for females in younger generations both to initiate relations and to propose marriage (Goldberg, 2000). Marriage proposal in Iran has a quite different status; it has a traditional and ritual quality and rather than being an informal talk between the future partners it takes place in a formal gathering and in the presence of the prospective couple’s families. Although the wedding is primarily a coupling of individuals, in Iranian social life it is considered as a union between the families of the bride and the groom. Therefore, the actual marriage arrangements are customarily made between the two families through long series of formal negotiations. In fact, the Iranian ceremony of marriage proposal can be viewed as a microcosm of marriage and marital relationships in Iranian culture portraying the social nature of marriage itself. According to Girgis, George, and Anderson (2012), marriage is not a conjugal partnership; it is not merely a religious or historical heritage rooted in a natural union of a man and a woman which is ordered to family life and childbearing and child rearing. Rather, marriage in its core is “a truly fundamental social and pre-political institution” (Girgis, George, & Anderson, 2012, p.23). Along similar lines, marriage proposal in the form of a family gathering, as is in Iran, has a social status and function. Iranian society and culture have created certain ideas about how marriage proposal is supposed to look, as well as, how it is supposed to be fulfilled by individuals. In Iranian society, the influence of religion, paternalism, and conventional norms on most aspects of one’s life is obvious. Needless to say, there are sociocultural prescriptions that govern Iranians’ marriage practices including marriage proposal. The present research takes up this as its point of departure and seeks to address instances of such sociocultural dominant conventions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The present research is premised on some theoretical assumptions. First of all, it is informed by the most recent interpretation of discourse as *any meaningful symbolic behavior* (Blommaert, 2005). Such interpretation of discourse demands altered approaches of discourse analysis; especially kinds of approaches that step out of merely textual-linguistic component of discourse and step into society where a host of multidimensional factors influence discourse as the real language that people use in their communications. In this spirit, discourse is the use of language seen as a form of social practice, and discourse analysis is analysis of how text/speech works within sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 1995). On the other hand, the present research draws on Van Dijk’s (2004) position that “discourse analysis should have a critical dimension” (p.17) and thus takes advantage of Critical Discourse Analysis

approach (hereafter CDA). The primary purpose of CDA is to “uncover how language works to construct meaning that signify people, objects and events in the world in specific ways” (Van Dijk, 2004, p.462) and it deals with the larger social, cultural, and ideological forces that influence people’s lives (Van Dijk, 2001, 2006). Put differently, the major concerns of CDA are how discourse is shaped and constructed by relations of ideology, power and systems of knowledge or belief and how actual instances of language use are employed to maintain or create social inequalities through representation of so-called reality which are not explicit to discourse participants. Based on this, verbal and non-verbal or *discoursal* components of exchanges in Iranian marriage proposal (*Khaastgaari*) could be a mirror of the indirect or overt patterns of domination and ideology behind the scenes of this tradition. CDA, thus, seems to offer a convenient and effective tool to delve into the interactions and negotiations within actual *Khaastgaari* events. It serves as a lens, looking through which may help figure out what invisible hidden hands are at play in *Khaastgaari* events and how these invisible threads manifest themselves in discourse and how people articulate recurring patterns of hidden drives in social practices through their actions, behaviors, talks; or precisely speaking, their discourse.

3. Purpose of the study

CDA research in Iranian literature is not scant; there is an extensive body of research on applying CDA to the study of power relations and authoritative traces in various sociopolitical contexts. Most salient of all is the huge bulk of studies on discourse of newspapers, news headlines, radio and TV debates, interviews, TV commercials, advertisements in magazines, and on-line ads ; for example: Babaii and Ansary (2001); Hajimohammadi (2011); Izadi and Saghay-Biria (2007); Rasti and Sahragard (2012); Semati, (2007); Yaghoobi (2009) to name but a few. The reason these studies focus on such themes is that news and advertisements are directly related to and representative of socio-economic and political trends of contemporary dominant disciplines and regulations in each country, including Iran. However, it is too simplistic to consider critical discourse analysis merely as a tool for investigating political and authoritative traces in discourse. Indeed, CDA covers a very broad range of subjects and tries to cast critical eyes over the effects of sociocultural as well as political and ideological dominance even in people’s everyday conversations (Blommaert, 2005). Thus, the purpose and point of significance of the present study is that it is an attempt to show that power relations and patterns of domination are not restricted to political contexts or other institutions that are somehow in direct relation with authorities, but conversely, they have very subtle expressions and manifestations in many common routine experiences, social practices, and communicative events; including traditional ceremonies. Based on this ground, the aim of the present study is to put the traditional ceremony of *Khaastgaari*, under the lens of critical discourse analysis, probe

into discursal exchanges of typical *Khaastgaari* events; then read between the lines of these exchanges, and finally identify the recognizable patterns that indicate the influences of power and domination in *Khaastgaari* discourse. In this respect, the current research seeks to address the following query:

- *What are the most salient sources of domination embedded in the discursal exchanges and negotiations in Khaastgaari?*

4. Method

4.1. Setting and participants

The data for the study came from observation of five *Khaastgaari* events which were attended by one of the researchers in a period of two years, between 2010 and 2012. The *Khaastgaari* events all took place in the city of Isfahan, Iran. The participants were from a variety of different families but were all of equal social status. The prospective couples' average age ranged from 24 to 32.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

The participants' exchanges were audiotaped and the significant parts of the exchanges were summarized and written down. These jotted-down notes provided a corpus of verbal and discursal features which were then analyzed drawing on the 'thematic analysis' approach which is the most common form of analysis in qualitative research (Atkinson & Paul, 1996; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Guest, 2012; Saldana, 2009). In this method of analysis, the researcher would examine the collected data and would identify themes and label them as codes or categories as they emerge when examining the data. The most important point in performing a thematic analysis is to decide about what counts as a *theme*. A theme is defined as what captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, 2012). In this light, the post-observation notes were read meticulously noting down the initial ideas and searching for recognizing recurrent themes within the data. The analysis was driven by both theoretical assumptions and the research question of the study. After the data were collated into potential themes, an ongoing analysis was done to refine the specifics and generate clear descriptions for each theme. At the final stage of the analysis, vivid extract examples were selected from the data in order to portray an illustrative picture of the analysis.

5. Findings and discussion

Drawing on the theoretical assumption of CDA and applying a thematic analysis on the data four main ideological themes as sources of domination in the participants' discourses were identified. These themes and their recognized salient characteristics are discussed below.

5.1. Family and elders

In all the observed *Khaastgaari* events (100%) it was the elders who took the lead and opened up the conversations. Most of the utterances were articulated by the parents and the prospective bride and groom spoke only when the elders asked them questions or invited them to speak. This bears witness to our conclusion that family and elders act as a domination source over individuals in *Khaastgaari* events. Indeed, until not very long ago, marriage in Iran was mostly in the form of 'arranged marriage' where partners were chosen for young people, typically by their parents. Over recent decades though, the concept of arranged marriage has changed or simply been mixed with other forms of dating; potential couples have the opportunity to meet and date each other at social organizations, in their daily life, or are introduced through friends or relatives. Arranged or romantic notwithstanding, marriage proposal in Iran is not an informal private matter between two people; rather, it is a formal arrangement with family approval. It greatly involves the community of people around the couple, particularly the female's father. Thus, since their approval is traditionally needed for marriage, parents and elders are seen as essential participants in *Khaastgaari* practice. This prime role is well represented in a recurring phrase which has become the hallmark of Iranian marriage:

[Translit: ba ejaze bozorgtar-ha baleh] [Literal trans.] Yes, با اجازه ی بزرگترها بله!
with the permission of the elders!

This sentence carries an ironic message in its deepest layer; it implies that the bride is accepting a long-life commitment but only if the 'older people of the family' give her permission to do so! It does not, however, connote any force or imposition; it shows respect and reverence. Anyone grown up in an Iranian family has learned from her/his early childhood that elders should always be respected and treated as superior; and that s/he should always stand up when they enter the room and should greet them first. Respect for elders is held as the highest family duty, and disagreement with them is considered sinful. It is a common practice for single adults (male and female) to live with their family until marriage and be governed by their elders and seek their permission regarding personal decisions. In every family gathering, celebration, and in making important decisions the company of elders is not

only privileged but also obligatory. This adherence to traditional age hierarchies does not mean that there is an intrinsic merit in being older; actually it refers to a very powerful *family structure* in Iranian culture that places enormous value on family and advises obedience, respect and deference to the elders. Family forms the heart of Iranian society and relationships within families are often multidimensional and intense. Families and kin groups are brought together to witness births, marriages, deaths, religious and other rituals, and the affairs of daily life. In-group cohesion is a sign of a strong family which is a great social credit.

Family structure and the way it influences and controls people's behavior and speech has noticeable marks in *Khaastgaari* discourse. In fact, it exists from the very beginning of this ceremony: Any *Khaastgaari* is arranged and initiated with an official request from an elder in the groom's family to an elder in the bride's family. Not strangely, when families meet in bride's family' house, elders take the lead in starting the conversations.

In the present study, there were many expressions and phrases that instantiated the dominance of family and elders over individuals. Table1 shows some of these expressions.

Table1. Language instances of domination of family and elders over individuals along with their literal translations

Elders' Statements (Literal Translation)	Elders' Statements (Persian and transliteration)
To settle the youths' lives	سر و سامان دادن به جوانها [sar va saman dadan be javanha]
To send in a girl to the home of fortune	فرستادن دختر به خانه‌ی بخت [ferestadan-e- dokhtar be khaneye bakht]
To roll up sleeves for a guy	دست و آستین بالا زدن برای پسر [dast va astin bala zadan baraye pesar]
To give a wife (to a guy)	زن دادن [zan dadan]
To give a husband (to a girl)	شوهر دادن [shohar dadan]
To send a girl out of home	دختر را بیرون کردن [dokhtar ra birun kardan]
To initiate 'yes' ceremony*/To decide on marriage portion	بله براندن /مهر براندن [bale berandan/mehr berandan]
To put the beard and scissors in elders' hands**	دادن ریش و قیچی به دست بزرگترها [dadan-e rish va gheichi be dast-e bozorgtarha]

* This 'yes' ceremony is intended to take the primary positive response from the prospective bride so as to pursue the issue later

**This indicates that the elders have the permission to tailor the conditions as they deem appropriate

Another recurring pattern that was heard from both families was:

[Translit: tu khanevadeh ma rasme bar ineke] تو خانوادہی ما رسم بر اینہ کہ....

[Literal trans.] It is a custom for our family...

A great number of questions and answers that were exchanged in the observed *Khaastgaari* events were structured around family attitudes, worldviews, manners and routines. That is not surprising considering the fact that the future bride or groom are going to be a part of their partner's family network who will remain in close contact and visit frequently; so they need to know whether or not they can cope with the new system. This shows that family values and norms play an important role in dictating one's life and social identity; and family cohesion and commitment to family is of great importance. An instance of the importance of family network in *Khaastgaari* is a practice called : 'تحقیق' [lit. investigation], where after the first session of *Khaastgaari*, the reputation and good name of future bride or groom and their families is *investigated* by making inquiries through their neighbors, friends, and acquaintances. It shows that the reputation of any family member influences the reputation of the entire family; hence, membership in an influential family is an important criterion in choosing spouses.

The power that family and elders have over young people has its roots in cultural organization of Iran society. In discussing the relations of power, there are two cultural dimensions: hierarchical and egalitarian societies. *Egalitarian* societies tend to view all people as having similar values, even when that may not be entirely true of the society. People in an egalitarian society strive for power equalization and demand justification because they believe that equality is their natural right (Arneson, 2002). Western cultures with their emphasis on the virtues of independence, individualism, individual freedom, and self-reliance are egalitarian. In stark contrast, in societies with prominent dominance hierarchies, people at lower levels of the hierarchy are perceived as having less value and are stigmatized (Boeree, 2007). Any hierarchical culture has very clear-cut pecking orders in social relations and a context in which such hierarchy manifests itself vividly is marital and family relations. The pursuit of individual desire and opposing the will of the group in such culture assumes superiority which is deplorable and results in a meltdown of harmony. This dictates obeying and respecting the decisions of elders and the dominance of group decisions, benefits, and interests over individual's preferences.

In the far east, hierarchical culture is believed to be a heritage of Confucian tradition that represents an ethos that 'privileges group harmony over individual freedom' (Mao, 1994; as cited in Leech, 2005, p.27). From this perspective, an individual's behavior becomes meaningful only in the context of the participation of others. When this happens, one's ego sings a chorus of union with the rest of the community. This *chorus of unity* has a familiar ring to Iranian culture which is best represented in Rumi's poems where *unity* is the

vital essence of redemption and deliverance, and individualism associates with Satan, separateness, heresy, and agony (Rumi, 2009).

5.2. Gender Roles

Another recurring theme which was observed in *Khaastgaari* negotiations indicated *gender roles* as a source of domination. Gender roles are sets of social and behavioral norms that are generally considered appropriate for either a man or a woman in a social or interpersonal relationship (Fenstermaker, 2002). These culturally defined gender ideologies are a reflection and a consequence of the aforementioned *hierarchical* organization in Iran. In a hierarchical society, a husband's role as patriarch gives him the responsibility to work outside and serve his wife and family, and kitchen, chores, and childcare are a wife's responsibility (even if she works outside, too!). When two people opt for getting married, they do so with some general understanding of the institutionally defined terms they are committing themselves to (i.e., what duties each is expected to perform, and so on). Since duties and roles are culturally and socially defined the future wife and husband, unconsciously, orient themselves toward those expected norms and show off characters that correspond to those responsibilities. According to society's conventions, males should undertake to provide financial support and security for females (even if the wife has financial resources herself) and in return expect a devoted wife, healthy children, and emotional care and comfort. Females, on the other side of the bargain, promise to bring kindness, care for the future family, fidelity, emotional support, and in return expect financial support and social respect and status but at the same time they need to make sure they are not blocked by their future husband and they have the right and freedom to pursue their education or to work outside. In the observed *Khaastgaari* events, the prospective groom's family tried to highlight such characteristics as business success, being ambitious and competitive in their profession, and other characteristics that society and culture expect men to have. Extract1 provides an example of such gender-oriented positions.

Extract 1:

- علی جان خیلی کاری و زرنگه، مستقله و روی پای خودشه.

[Translit: Ali jan kheili kari va zarange, mostaghele va ruye paye khodeshe]

[Literal trans.] Ali is very industrious and hard-working; he is financially independent.

On the other hand, the prospective bride's family focused on characteristics which are traditionally categorized as *feminine* attributes. Extract2 is an example of such gender-role conformity.

Extract 2:

- شکوفه خانم هنرمنده، آشپزی و مهمون داریش نمونه‌س.

[Translit: Shokufe khanom honarmande va mehmun darish namune has]

[Literal trans.] Ms Shokoofe is really artful, she is unique in cooking and serving guests.

5.3. Prestige

Another hidden yet significant perceived sociocultural obligation in the discursal exchanges of the observed *Khaastgaari* events was the participants' seeking of prestige. *Prestige* is defined in common usage as "respect and deference freely conferred on an individual by others" (Plourde, 2009, p.270). A person having prestige is honored by other people. A typical indicator of prestige and high social status is having precious and costly things. In fact, having precious materials of all kinds serves the same purpose all over the world, that of signaling and enhancing status (Clark, 1986). However, in a *hierarchical* society it gains an additional function; it becomes an index of power and domination. As evidence, in an empirical ethnographic research, Clark and Blake (1994) observed that in hierarchical societies ambitious or superior men desire prestige and use prestigious goods to gain power and attract followers. Thus, in such societies prestigious goods seem to confer prestige on their owners by reflecting higher social power, status, and resources.

The same norm is also observable in Iran's society; valuables are critically important in establishing a person's social position and in gaining personal prestige. Not strangely, it is translated into discourse of *Khaastgaari* as well and actually plays as a hidden drive that motivates many of discursive behaviors of this ceremony. In fact, it attaches a non-verbal component to the negotiation of *khaastgaari* through which the two parties send and receive wordless messages. For example, if the groom family goes to *Khaastgaari* with an elegant large bouquet of flowers accompanied with expensive confectionery it is interpreted as indices of extravagant economic choice, wealth, and therefore more social status. Or the bride's family's lavish home furniture is understood as a sign of high social rank. Thus, any belonging and property of each group is under the spot; anything in sight is interpreted as their taste and delicacy – even their choice of drinks and fruits- and of course, valuables such as luxury homes, expensive modern automobiles, high-priced appliances and household devices are strong evidences of having prestige and therefore being an excellent case for marriage. That is why both families try to do the best in their power to show off more prestige in *Khaastgaari*.

5.4. Religious Norms

Another identified source of sociocultural domination was the participants' attempt to observing the religious norms. Culture and religion in Iran are fully and inextricably interwoven. Religious beliefs and practices are traceable in Iranian's every day routines and activities. *Khaastgaari* ceremony is no exception and religious principles play an important role in all the aspects of this practice. Table 2 presents some examples of religious expressions that participants in *Khaastgaari* –often habitually- articulate. These expressions mainly cluster around two themes; firstly: asking God for help and support; that refers to Muslim belief that only God has the absolute power and will to change things for the better. The second theme shows the Muslim belief in fate, divine destiny, and 'Qadaa and Qadar'; reflecting the religious belief that human's decisions are not merely a matter of their free will but since they have limitations and are subject to factors beyond their limited knowledge they submit to God's will. They also believe that whatever comes about has a justification (Hekmat) even if it is against the will of humans.

Table 2. Some frequent religious expressions used in *Khaastgaari*

English Translation	Persian and Transliteration
Following God's and the prophet tradition	به سنت خدا و پیغمبر عمل کردن [be sonat khoda va peyghambar amal kardan]
Inshallah everything will lead all to the good	ان شاء الله به خیر و سلامتی [in sha allah be kheir va salamati]
Whatever the luck brings about	هر چی قسمت باشه [har chi ghesmat bashe]
Gain or Kismet (fate)	یا نصیب و یا قسمت [ya nasib va ya ghesmat]
Blessed, inshallah	مبارکه ان شاء الله! [mobarake in sha allah]

The impression of religion in *Khaastgaari* does not reflect only in speech. There are various activities that echo this influence. A prime example is the practice called:

[Translit: estekhare][Literal trans.] Consulting God "استخاره"

In the Muslim tradition, in important decisions, including marriage, people can ask the help of God, performing 'estekhaare'. Clerics or faithful family members are asked to open Quran and interpret the sentences of the opened page and determine whether the interpretation is good, bad, or middle. Estekhare is taken seriously in many families in Iran; if the interpretation is *bad* the marriage will be called off. Nevertheless, appealing to religious beliefs and practices in *Khaastgaari* has another function which actually provides another way of manipulating discourse in order to have a more influential role in

negotiation of *Khaastgaari*. Iranian culture views religious people as good, honest, trustworthy, and reliable. Governmental media in its portrayal of good/bad people has established and normalized the stereotype that if a family has religious books in their book case, has the picture of religious leaders on the walls, or wear religious visual symbols, they are religious and therefore good and trustable; hence, it is safe to tie the knot with them! This stereotype seems to have been unconsciously absorbed by people. The two families involved in *Khaastgaari* try to observe the good manners as much as possible, orient themselves toward the cultural norm of ‘being religious means being good’ and try to display faith and obedience to religious principles even if they are not very devotedly religious people! As another evidence of gender-difference in Iranian culture, females are expected to exhibit such moves more strictly and frequently. For example, even in those families with no religious stringency for practices especially ‘Hijab’, the would-be bride appears in *Khaastgaari* in conservative style dressing and attire which covers up the whole body. Wearing revealing outfits is strongly deplorable and females have to dress conservatively in order to seem modest, decent and chaste. In sum, orienting toward religious and cultural norms and displaying conservative styles and demeanor is an observable feature of *Khaastgaari* discourse that helps people involved in negotiation of *Khaastgaari* to take the upper hand and play more powerfully and confidently.

6. Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to look at the traditional marriage-proposal practice in Iran –*Khaastgaari*– from a critical discourse analysis perspective. The findings of the study revealed that there are some drives concealed beneath what people say and do in *Khaastgaari* governing the running discourse of this ceremony. These sources of domination in turn root in the hierarchical culture of Iran. In the first place, *Khaastgaari* is influenced and directed by the power of family and parents whose permission and agreement is essential for the marriage. Further and more significantly, differentiation of gender roles in Iranian culture acts as another source of power in discourse of *Khaastgaari*. Moreover, participants in *Khaastgaari* follow the rules of etiquette and perform a number of culturally determined and normative acts including striving to exhibit a higher social rank and prestige, or observance of good manners by showing obedience to religious norms. All these manipulations are basically carried out through discourse, in the sense of *any meaningful symbolic behavior* (Blommaert, 2005) and aim to establish rapport and affinity between the two groups.

This diminutive piece of research offers evidence for Wodak (1999) and Saville-Troike's (1997) suggestion that ritual and traditional practices in a particular language will manifest how a society chooses and codifies the acts that correspond most closely to its ideology and value system.

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