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Navigating Educational Landscapes: A Linguistic Analysis of Noun Phrases in Maleeha Lodhi's Discourse on Education

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Abstract

Education discourse often functions as a reflection of broader power relations within society, particularly in politically constrained contexts where institutional autonomy and intellectual freedom are under pressure. This study examines the role of noun phrases in constructing meaning, evaluation, and ideology in Maleeha Lodhi's article *Deterring Dissent in Education*, published in *Index on Censorship* in 1985. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis and functional approaches to grammar, the paper analyses how noun phrases are employed to represent academic actors, institutional processes, and the educational climate during Pakistan's martial law period. The analysis demonstrates that Lodhi's noun phrases operate as compact ideological units that condense complex socio-political realities into stable linguistic forms. Through metaphorical labelling, evaluative categorization, and abstraction, noun phrases shape readers' understanding of repression, academic legitimacy, and intellectual control. By foregrounding phrase-level grammatical choices, this study contributes to contemporary research on education discourse and political language, highlighting the significance of grammar in articulating critique and resistance within authoritarian settings.

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Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a key site where political power, ideological influence, and social control intersect. In contexts marked by authoritarian governance, education often becomes a strategic domain through which conformity is enforced and dissent is managed. Scholars working within

Critical Discourse Analysis have consistently argued that language plays a central role in these processes, as discursive choices shape how institutions, actors, and practices are represented and evaluated (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 2008). Educational texts produced under such conditions therefore merit close linguistic attention, as they reveal how power

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relations are constructed and contested through grammar and vocabulary.

Pakistan's educational system during the martial law regime of General Zia-ul-Haq provides a particularly revealing context for examining the relationship between language, education, and power. Following the military takeover in 1977, democratic processes were suspended and a series of ideological reforms were introduced, many of which directly affected higher education. Research has shown that universities and colleges during this period were subjected to increased surveillance, ideological monitoring, and administrative control, resulting in a significant erosion of academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Khan, 2010; Rahman, 2002). Within this context, education was not merely restructured administratively but discursively reframed as a domain requiring ideological discipline.

Maleeha Lodhi's article *Deterring Dissent in Education* offers a critical account of these developments, documenting how political repression and Islamization policies transformed academic life in Pakistan. Lodhi describes the silencing of critical scholars, the promotion of ideological conformity, and the creation of an environment marked by fear and insecurity within educational institutions (Lodhi, 1985). While her article has been cited primarily for its political insights, its linguistic construction has received little systematic analysis. Yet, the persuasive force of Lodhi's critique relies heavily on the way language is used to frame repression, authority, and resistance.

This study argues that noun phrases play a central role in Lodhi's discourse and are key to understanding how her critique is linguistically realized. From a functional perspective, noun phrases are among the most information-dense grammatical units in English, capable of encapsulating complex meanings through modification, abstraction, and nominalization (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999). In institutional and political discourse, noun phrases often serve to stabilize interpretations, obscure agency, and present contested social processes as objective realities (Fairclough, 2013). These properties make noun phrases especially relevant for analysing education discourse under authoritarian conditions.

Recent scholarship in discourse studies and education research further underscores the importance of phrase-level analysis. Studies of education policy discourse have shown that grammatical choices play a crucial role in constructing educational "problems," defining legitimate actors, and shaping public understanding of institutional change (Ball, 2012; Mulderrig, 2019). At the same time, corpus-based research on academic and policy writing demonstrates a long-term shift toward phrasal complexity, with increased reliance

on noun phrases to convey abstraction and authority (Biber & Gray, 2011). These developments suggest that analysing noun phrases can provide valuable insights into how education is discursively constructed as an institutional and ideological space.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to provide a detailed linguistic analysis of noun phrases in Lodhi's *Deterring Dissent in Education*, examining how phrase-level grammatical choices contribute to the representation of education under martial law. Rather than treating noun phrases as isolated grammatical units, the study explores their discourse functions within the broader socio-political context of Pakistan in the late 1970s and 1980s. By doing so, the paper seeks to demonstrate how grammar itself becomes a vehicle for critique, resistance, and moral evaluation in public discourse on education.

Education, Power, and Discourse in Pakistan

The relationship between education and political power in Pakistan has long been shaped by struggles over ideology, identity, and authority. Educational institutions have frequently been viewed as sites for producing national cohesion, moral discipline, and ideological alignment, particularly during periods of political instability. Under General Zia-ul-Haq's martial law, these tendencies were intensified through explicit policies aimed at Islamizing education and regulating intellectual life. Studies of this period document how curriculum reforms, administrative controls, and legal mechanisms were employed to align education with state ideology and suppress dissenting voices (Rahman, 2002; Khan, 2010).

From a discourse-analytic perspective, such transformations are not merely institutional but also linguistic. The way education is talked about, categorized, and evaluated reflects broader power relations and ideological goals. CDA research emphasizes that institutional control is often enacted through language that presents authority as natural and resistance as deviant (Fairclough, 2013). In education discourse, this frequently involves abstract noun phrases that frame policy interventions as neutral processes rather than political actions.

Lodhi's article intervenes in this discursive landscape by challenging dominant representations of education during the martial law period. Her critique exposes the mechanisms through which dissent was discouraged and conformity rewarded, but it does so through carefully constructed linguistic choices. By analysing these choices, particularly at the level of noun phrases, it becomes possible to see how language is used not only to describe repression but to make it intelligible as a systemic and institutional phenomenon.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis and Noun Phrase Construction

This study is theoretically grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis, which views language as a form of social practice and emphasizes the relationship between linguistic structure, power, and ideology. CDA scholars argue that discourse does not merely reflect social reality but actively participates in constructing and legitimizing particular worldviews and institutional arrangements (Fairclough, 2013). Within this framework, grammatical choices are treated as meaningful and ideologically charged, especially in texts produced within institutional and political contexts such as education.

Fairclough's approach to CDA is particularly relevant to the present study because it foregrounds the role of grammar in shaping representations of social actors and processes. According to Fairclough, features such as nominalization and abstraction can obscure agency, transform actions into states, and present historically contingent practices as naturalized realities (Fairclough, 2013). In education discourse, this often results in representations that depoliticize policy decisions or conceal the actors responsible for institutional change. Analysing noun phrases, therefore, allows researchers to uncover how grammatical form contributes to the ideological framing of education.

van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of discourse and power further strengthens this analytical perspective. van Dijk argues that elite discourse frequently relies on lexical and grammatical strategies that categorize social groups, allocate legitimacy, and manage public knowledge (van Dijk, 2008). Group labeling, abstraction, and evaluative modification are central to these strategies. Coordinated noun phrases, evaluative adjectives, and abstract head nouns function as tools through which discourse constructs in-groups and out-groups and legitimizes particular interpretations of social reality. This is especially pertinent in education discourse, where representations of "scholars," "institutions," and "processes" carry significant ideological weight.

From a linguistic standpoint, functional and corpus-based descriptions of English grammar provide further justification for focusing on noun phrases. Extensive research has demonstrated that noun phrases are among the most information-dense structures in English, particularly in academic, institutional, and policy-related registers (Biber et al., 1999). These registers show a strong tendency toward phrasal elaboration, with meaning increasingly conveyed through complex noun phrases rather than through clausal structures. Biber and Gray (2011) argue that this shift toward nominal style is a defining feature of modern informational discourse, enabling writers to compress complex meanings

into compact grammatical forms that signal authority and objectivity.

In recent years, research on noun phrase complexity has continued to highlight the importance of noun phrases as carriers of abstraction and evaluation. Studies in applied linguistics and writing research show that noun phrase elaboration plays a crucial role in constructing argumentation, institutional stance, and informational density (Biber & Gray, 2021; Staples et al., 2016). Although Lodhi's article is not an academic research paper, it shares important stylistic features with institutional and policy discourse, particularly in its reliance on abstract and evaluative noun phrases to frame educational realities.

By integrating CDA with functional descriptions of noun phrase structure, this study treats noun phrases as discursive resources through which education is ideologically constructed. The analysis does not examine noun phrases in isolation but considers how they function within the broader textual and socio-political context of Lodhi's discourse. This theoretical framework allows for an examination of how phrase-level grammatical choices contribute to the representation of repression, academic legitimacy, and institutional control in education under martial law.

Recent developments within Critical Discourse Analysis also emphasize the importance of fine-grained grammatical analysis in understanding institutional discourse. Wodak (2024) highlights that contemporary CDA increasingly focuses on micro-level linguistic features, including nominalization and categorization, to explain how power and ideology are sustained in public and policy-oriented texts. This perspective supports the present analysis by situating noun phrase examination within current methodological directions in discourse studies.

Noun Phrases and Education Discourse

Education discourse is characterized by a high degree of abstraction, institutional terminology, and evaluative language. Scholars have noted that educational texts frequently rely on noun phrases to define problems, identify stakeholders, and frame policy interventions (Ball, 2012). Such noun phrases often function as what Fairclough describes as "discursive technologies" that organize social reality by naming and categorizing phenomena in particular ways (Fairclough, 2013). In this sense, noun phrases are not simply grammatical units but tools for constructing educational meaning.

In policy-oriented and institutional discourse, noun phrases often replace verbs and processes, thereby presenting actions as static entities. This grammatical strategy can have

significant ideological effects, as it allows complex social processes to appear natural and inevitable. For example, phrases such as “institutional reform,” “quality assurance mechanisms,” or “academic standards” can obscure the political decisions and power relations underlying these constructs. Research in education policy discourse has shown that such nominal structures play a key role in shaping how educational change is perceived and debated (Mulderriq, 2019).

Recent work in education discourse analysis continues to emphasize the importance of examining grammatical detail. Scholars working within critical policy discourse analysis argue that attention to phrase-level structures reveals how educational problems are framed, how responsibility is distributed, and how certain interpretations are legitimized over others (Mulderriq, 2019). This approach has been increasingly applied to higher education contexts, where discourse often mediates tensions between autonomy, accountability, and control.

In politically sensitive contexts, the ideological work performed by noun phrases becomes even more pronounced. Under authoritarian conditions, overt political critique may be risky, leading writers to rely on indirect or abstract forms of representation. Noun phrases provide a means of articulating critique through categorization and abstraction rather than explicit accusation. By naming “conditions,” “climates,” or “forces,” writers can represent repression as systemic without directly attributing blame to specific actors. This strategy is evident in Lodhi’s discourse, where noun phrases function as linguistic mechanisms for exposing repression while maintaining analytical distance.

The present study builds on these insights by examining how noun phrases in *Deterring Dissent in Education* construct education as an institutional environment shaped by fear, ideological control, and compromised academic legitimacy. Rather than treating education as a neutral or technical domain, Lodhi’s noun phrases frame it as a contested space where power operates through institutional practices and discursive representations.

Research Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is qualitative and interpretive, consistent with established practices in Critical Discourse Analysis. The primary data consist of Maleeha Lodhi’s article *Deterring Dissent in Education*, published in *Index on Censorship* in 1985. This text was selected because it offers a sustained critique of higher education under authoritarian rule and employs a rich range of evaluative and abstract linguistic structures (Lodhi, 1985).

The analysis focuses on noun phrases that are salient in terms of ideological meaning and discourse function. These noun phrases were identified through close reading of the text, with attention paid to repetition, metaphorical content, evaluative modification, and abstraction. The analysis considers both the internal structure of noun phrases and their role within the surrounding discourse. This approach is informed by functional descriptions of English grammar, which emphasize the relationship between grammatical form and communicative purpose (Biber et al., 1999).

Interpretation of the data is guided by CDA principles that link linguistic form to social context. Following Fairclough, the analysis examines how noun phrases contribute to the representation of social actors, institutional processes, and educational conditions, and how these representations align with broader power relations (Fairclough, 2013). van Dijk’s emphasis on categorization and ideological framing further informs the interpretation, particularly in relation to how academic actors are labelled and evaluated (van Dijk, 2008).

The methodological aim is not to produce generalizable quantitative findings but to provide a detailed and contextually grounded analysis of how noun phrases function in a specific, influential text. This approach is consistent with qualitative discourse-analytic research in education, which prioritizes depth of interpretation and theoretical insight over statistical generalization (Ball, 2012).

Textual Analysis: Noun Phrases as Discursive and Ideological Resources

The analytical focus of this section is on how noun phrases in Maleeha Lodhi’s *Deterring Dissent in Education* function as discursive resources through which educational repression, institutional authority, and academic legitimacy are constructed. Rather than serving merely descriptive purposes, these noun phrases operate as ideologically loaded units that condense complex political and institutional realities into compact linguistic forms. Through metaphor, categorization, abstraction, and affective framing, Lodhi’s noun phrases structure the reader’s understanding of education as a space shaped by fear, control, and compromised intellectual freedom.

A prominent feature of Lodhi’s discourse is the use of metaphorical noun phrases that frame repression as an active and morally charged force. One of the most striking examples is the phrase “forces of darkness and obscurantism,” which Lodhi employs to describe the ideological and political pressures exerted on higher education. This noun phrase transforms repression into a collective entity, invoking imagery associated with ignorance, concealment, and opposition to enlightenment. By selecting “darkness” and

“obscurantism” as head nouns, Lodhi draws on long-standing epistemological metaphors that contrast knowledge with ignorance and reason with irrationality. Such metaphorical framing intensifies the evaluative force of the critique, positioning repression not as an accidental by-product of policy but as a deliberate and hostile presence within the educational system (Lodhi, 1985).

From a discourse-analytic perspective, metaphorical noun phrases play a crucial role in shaping ideological interpretation. Fairclough argues that metaphor in institutional discourse often serves to naturalize particular ways of seeing social problems by embedding evaluation within apparently descriptive language (Fairclough, 2013). In Lodhi’s text, the metaphorical noun phrase constructs repression as a unified adversary, thereby simplifying complex political processes into a morally legible opposition between knowledge and anti-knowledge. This discursive move allows Lodhi to articulate resistance without relying on overt political accusation, a strategy that is particularly relevant in authoritarian contexts.

Another central discursive strategy in Lodhi’s article is the categorization of academic actors through coordinated noun phrases. The expression “real scholars, pseudo-scholars and sycophants” constitutes a clear evaluative taxonomy that distinguishes legitimate intellectual authority from compromised or opportunistic academic identities. The adjective “real” functions as a marker of authenticity and epistemic legitimacy, while “pseudo” signals imitation and lack of substance. The noun “sycophants” introduces an explicitly moral dimension, associating certain academics with excessive deference to power rather than commitment to knowledge. Through coordination, these noun phrases create a hierarchy of academic identities, framing the academic community as divided along ethical and ideological lines (Lodhi, 1985).

van Dijk’s work on discourse and ideology provides a useful lens for interpreting this categorization. He argues that group labeling in elite discourse often functions to allocate legitimacy and blame, constructing in-groups and out-groups through lexical and grammatical choices (van Dijk, 2008). In Lodhi’s discourse, noun phrases serve precisely this function, marking “real scholars” as victims of repression while positioning “pseudo-scholars” and “sycophants” as beneficiaries of ideological conformity. Because these labels are realized as noun phrases rather than as clauses, they appear as stable social categories rather than as contested judgments, thereby reinforcing their ideological force.

Lodhi also relies heavily on abstract noun phrases to represent institutional processes within higher education. The phrase “processes of scientific research” exemplifies this tendency.

By nominalizing research as a “process,” Lodhi emphasizes its systematic and institutional nature, presenting knowledge production as an organized activity governed by norms and procedures. The subsequent description of these processes being “arrested” frames repression as an interruption of institutional continuity rather than as isolated acts of censorship. This abstraction allows Lodhi to critique the impact of political control on education at a structural level, highlighting how repression affects the very mechanisms through which knowledge is generated (Lodhi, 1985).

Critical discourse analysts have long noted that nominalization plays a key role in representing social processes in institutional texts. Fairclough observes that nominal structures often enable writers to foreground outcomes while backgrounding agency, thereby presenting processes as naturalized states of affairs (Fairclough, 2013). In Lodhi’s text, however, nominalization serves a slightly different function. Rather than concealing agency, it amplifies the scope of repression by representing its effects as systemic. The noun phrase “processes of scientific research” invites readers to consider the long-term institutional consequences of repression, reinforcing the argument that academic freedom is not merely constrained at the level of individual expression but at the level of knowledge production itself.

Another significant pattern in Lodhi’s discourse is the construction of the educational environment through affective noun phrases. The expression “a climate of fear and insecurity” exemplifies how emotional states are transformed into environmental conditions through nominalization. The head noun “climate” suggests permanence, pervasiveness, and collective experience, implying that fear and insecurity are not temporary reactions but enduring features of academic life. This framing positions emotional constraint as an institutional condition, shaping how scholars think, behave, and self-regulate within educational spaces (Lodhi, 1985).

The use of “climate” as a noun phrase head aligns with broader patterns in education and policy discourse, where environmental metaphors are frequently used to describe institutional conditions. Research on education policy language has shown that such metaphors function to frame problems as systemic and diffuse, thereby shifting attention from individual responsibility to institutional context (Ball, 2012). In Lodhi’s discourse, this framing reinforces the argument that repression operates not only through explicit control mechanisms but also through affective regulation, creating an atmosphere in which dissent becomes psychologically risky.

Legal and ideological frameworks are also introduced through noun phrases that situate education within broader systems of

authority. The reference to “Islamic Law (Sharia)” functions as a nominal anchor linking educational policy to religious and legal governance. By naming this framework as a noun phrase, Lodhi signals that education is being reshaped according to ideological criteria that extend beyond pedagogical concerns. This representation aligns with scholarly analyses of the Zia period, which document how Islamization policies permeated educational institutions and curricula, altering the conditions under which academic knowledge was evaluated and transmitted (Rahman, 2002; Khan, 2010).

The cumulative effect of these noun phrase constructions is the creation of an educational landscape characterized by repression, ideological control, and contested legitimacy. Rather than relying on overt political slogans, Lodhi’s discourse achieves its critical force through phrase-level grammatical choices that condense evaluation and abstraction. Functional grammar research supports the view that such noun phrase density is characteristic of institutional critique, where writers seek to manage complexity and authority through compact linguistic forms (Biber et al., 1999; Biber & Gray, 2011).

Taken together, the metaphorical, categorial, abstract, and affective noun phrases in Lodhi’s article function as key discourse mechanisms for representing education under martial law. They enable the author to articulate critique, assign moral judgment, and construct institutional realities in ways that are both analytically precise and rhetorically powerful. This analysis demonstrates that noun phrases are not peripheral grammatical elements but central tools through which education discourse is ideologically structured.

Discussion

The analysis presented in the previous section demonstrates that noun phrases play a central role in shaping the ideological and evaluative force of Maleeha Lodhi’s discourse on education. Rather than functioning merely as grammatical units, noun phrases operate as compact discursive devices through which repression, authority, and legitimacy are constructed and interpreted. This finding aligns closely with core assumptions of Critical Discourse Analysis, which emphasize that grammatical choices are inseparable from power relations and social meaning (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 2008).

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the demonstration that metaphorical noun phrases allow Lodhi to frame educational repression as a coherent and morally charged phenomenon. Phrases such as “forces of darkness and obscurantism” condense complex political dynamics into a single conceptual entity, enabling the reader to perceive repression as an organized and deliberate obstruction to

knowledge. This strategy reflects what Fairclough describes as the ideological function of metaphor in institutional discourse, where evaluative meanings are embedded within seemingly descriptive language (Fairclough, 2013). By packaging repression into a noun phrase, Lodhi stabilizes her critique and presents it as a recognizable social reality rather than as a subjective interpretation.

The categorization of academic actors through coordinated noun phrases further illustrates how grammatical form contributes to ideological meaning. The distinction between “real scholars,” “pseudo-scholars,” and “sycophants” constructs a moral and epistemic hierarchy that reflects broader struggles over legitimacy within higher education. Such categorization resonates with van Dijk’s argument that elite discourse often relies on group labeling to distribute credibility and blame (van Dijk, 2008). In the context of education, these noun phrase labels do not merely describe individuals; they shape how academic integrity itself is defined, contested, and valued under conditions of political control.

The abstraction of institutional processes through noun phrases such as “processes of scientific research” highlights another key discursive function of noun phrases in Lodhi’s text. By representing research as a process that can be “arrested,” Lodhi shifts attention from individual acts of censorship to systemic disruption. This abstraction aligns with functional linguistic research showing that nominalization is a common strategy in institutional discourse for representing complex activities as stable entities (Biber et al., 1999). However, unlike bureaucratic texts that often use nominalization to obscure responsibility, Lodhi’s use of abstract noun phrases amplifies the structural nature of repression, making its institutional consequences more visible.

The construction of the educational environment through affective noun phrases such as “a climate of fear and insecurity” further underscores the ideological work performed by noun phrases. The metaphor of “climate” transforms emotional responses into enduring institutional conditions, suggesting that fear is not incidental but embedded within the educational system itself. This discursive move reflects broader patterns in education and policy discourse, where environmental metaphors are used to frame problems as systemic rather than episodic (Ball, 2012). In Lodhi’s discourse, this framing reinforces the argument that repression operates not only through formal regulations but also through the psychological regulation of academic behavior.

The discussion also reveals how noun phrases link education to wider ideological and legal frameworks. References to “Islamic Law (Sharia)” position education within a broader

system of governance that extends beyond pedagogical concerns. This linguistic linkage reflects scholarly analyses of the Zia period, which document how education was integrated into ideological state projects through legal, curricular, and administrative reforms (Rahman, 2002; Khan, 2010). By naming these frameworks explicitly, Lodhi's noun phrases situate education within a network of power relations that transcend the university itself.

From a broader perspective, the findings of this study contribute to recent scholarship on education discourse by demonstrating the analytical value of phrase-level analysis. Contemporary research in education policy discourse increasingly emphasizes the need to examine how textual features shape the construction of educational problems and solutions (Mulderigg, 2019). This study extends that work by showing that noun phrases, in particular, function as key sites where ideology, evaluation, and institutional meaning converge. By focusing on noun phrases, the analysis provides a more granular understanding of how discourse constructs education as a contested space under authoritarian conditions.

Moreover, the findings resonate with recent linguistic research on noun phrase complexity and informational density. Studies have shown that noun phrase elaboration is a defining feature of modern informational and institutional writing, enabling writers to compress meaning and project authority (Biber & Gray, 2011). Lodhi's discourse, while journalistic in form, shares these characteristics, suggesting that her linguistic choices draw on conventions associated with institutional critique and policy commentary. This observation reinforces the argument that noun phrases are central to how authority and evaluation are linguistically enacted in education discourse.

Recent scholarship continues to emphasise that education discourse is a key site where power relations, governance practices, and ideological priorities are linguistically negotiated. Contemporary studies of education policy discourse highlight how abstraction, categorization, and nominal structures contribute to the construction of authority and legitimacy in higher education governance (Rizvi & Lingard, 2023). Such findings reinforce the argument advanced in this study that noun phrases are not merely grammatical conveniences but strategic discourse resources that shape how educational realities are conceptualized and contested.

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of noun phrases in Maleeha Lodhi's *Deterring Dissent in Education*, demonstrating that phrase-level grammatical choices are central to the construction of meaning, ideology, and evaluation in

education discourse under authoritarian rule. Through metaphorical labeling, evaluative categorization, abstraction of institutional processes, and affective framing, noun phrases function as compact ideological carriers that shape readers' understanding of repression, academic legitimacy, and institutional control.

The analysis shows that Lodhi's critique of education during Pakistan's martial law period is not conveyed solely through explicit political argumentation but is embedded in the grammatical fabric of the text. Noun phrases transform complex socio-political realities into stable textual entities, enabling the author to articulate resistance and moral judgment within a constrained discursive environment. This finding supports key claims of Critical Discourse Analysis that grammar plays a decisive role in reproducing and contesting power relations

By foregrounding noun phrases as central discourse resources, this study contributes to the growing body of research on education discourse and policy language. It demonstrates that detailed linguistic analysis can enrich our understanding of how education is represented, contested, and governed through language. The study also highlights the relevance of phrase-level analysis for examining texts produced under conditions where overt political critique may be limited, showing how grammatical choices enable indirect yet powerful forms of resistance.

Future research may extend this analysis by examining a broader corpus of education-related texts produced during authoritarian periods or by comparing Lodhi's discourse with contemporary education policy documents. Such work would further illuminate how noun phrases function across genres and contexts to shape educational meaning and institutional power. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of attending to grammatical detail in education discourse analysis, revealing how language itself becomes a site of struggle over knowledge, authority, and freedom.

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