

The Aurat March: Common Feminist Choices and Different Cultural and Religious Worlds

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Abstract

Religion, culture, and gender issues are interconnected in diverse perspectives. The debate concerning religious and cultural adjustments in terms of gender justice plays a role to understand sexuality discourses in miscellaneous outlooks. The present study is endeavour to explore the relationship between Islam, women's activism for gender justice and cultural discourses. It primarily focuses on the conceptual framework of the activism of women through "Aurat March" (Women March) in terms of their exertion for gender justice and how it has been perceived by the nation-state. The present research also examines different terminological and structural complexities emergent after post-march and divided the nation-state into different groups consisting of supporters and scoffers. So here in this study I argued, what makes these people to label these activists as "westernized", "foreign agenda based" or "secularists" and how the "sufferer women's real issues" in society and preference to "national interests" over "individual interests" can be better addressed through productive activism in coming eras.

Keywords: *Islam, Aurat March, Cultural transformation, Pakistan, Women's rights*

Introduction

Feminism started in Western countries but attracted not only to Western but non-Western, indigenous communities, and spread to diverse regions, geographies and cultures in some recent decades. Despite of the fact, secularization or modernization is not the basic concern of the general public except for those who belong to a specific class but it still affects richly across diverse cultures. In the sense of secularization/westernization, modernization has always remained a true concern of little elite class group of a society.

It is not an easy process to transform the minds and culture of the majority into secularization. Although, minority has accepted and implemented it, the majority did not prefer the secular outlook and traditions.

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Since the modern notion of “human Rights” originated in Western secular context, Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular find themselves in dilemma when they participate or initiate in any discussion concerning human rights either in Western or Muslim countries. Western civilization has been an eager advocate of liberating Muslim women in terms of improving their perceived condition by fighting the *ḥijāb* and pressing on their sufferings. Now many women’s rights activists are working hard in Pakistani society for women’s freedom and side by side by experiencing severe backlashes due to some interests. The inside criticism of contemporary women’s engagement for “specific empowerment option” stems from formulations that range regionally, religiously, and culturally and cater to the interests of certain groups. The concept of “freedom of women” in the context of Islamic philosophy is totally distinguishing and unique to that of secular inclinations towards “liberation of women”. Muslim women’s freedom philosophy involves religious, social and moral structures to their leading urgencies while claiming for their rights. Therefore, this research analyses that what makes these people of nation-state to think about these activists being “Westernized” and their demands as imported agendas? We will analyse the discourses concerning women’s representation, victimization and feminist politics in the context of Pakistani culture and religion and how transnational feminist scholarship without measuring its audiences’ demand in the context of Pakistani society could be less effective and less productive. The relationship between diverse cultural and religious scholarships and how they affect women’s life is something to address here by seeking the answers to less discussed cross-cultured representational discourses.

The Aurat March, Sexuality and Gender Justice:

The yearly event, known as the Aurat March, which was declared by numerous communities in Pakistan in March of 2018 towards demanding the equal rights for diverse marginal communities. The Aurat March, according to its organisers, represented all concepts of the feminist movement: liberals desiring autonomy, social services, and constitutional safeguards; radical feminists seeking liberation from patriarchy; and socialists demanding independence from capitalism and patriarchy. The activism for women’s rights and gender justice is not newly emergent in Pakistan. Beginning from APWA (All Pakistan Women’s Association) to current Aurat March, much of the scholarly literature has been produced to analyse old and modern-day Pakistani women’s rights activities and their struggle to bridge women’s rights, gender issues, cultural notions, and religious perceptions. Many of the research scholars has written extensively about the actual issues and helped shedding light on gender justice and how complex this terrain is by contrasting it to diverse dimensions including but not limited to social, political, legal, cultural and religious one. The women’s rights activism begun as reformations of certain laws to modern street activism during 1980; and then in 21st century continued as modern street/social media. It took seventy-four years consisting of silence, street slogans and social media platform struggles to validate the rights and responsibilities in terms of modernizing

Pakistani women. In 2018, young women with the help of some senior women's rights activists brought the issues of women's rights, sexuality and gender justice into the streets of Karachi with explosive results under the banner Hum Aurtein "we women" which provoked a social media backlash. The severe backlash has historical roots in Pakistani women's rights activism from "Westernization" to "Elites' Agenda" and the narrative went forward from "indecent" to "cyberbullying". While this caricature came to be deployed as a central oppositional strategy in the 1980s, the idea that feminism is a Western-derived liberation discourse and the image of the Pakistani feminist as Westernized continue to dominate the contemporary collective consciousness in Pakistan. While discussing post-march (2018) feedbacks, Dossa elaborates:

"The post-march repercussions were not as pleasant. Many Pakistani men feel insecure with this public display and that the privilege granted to them by patriarchy is being challenged, which has really hit a raw nerve. The posters presented at the 2018 march and subsequent marches led to traumatic experiences of cyberbullying for many, which both the participants and organizers were unprepared for. Memes to mock the posters were generated and circulated on social media. The 2019 and 2020 marches seem to attract even further angst and misogynistic responses."

By analyzing the Aurat march contents since 2018, the total situation shows reversibly their demands deliberately or involuntarily revolve around women dressing, oppression, coercion, being forced to get married, being subjugated at homes, working like slaves and being chained. Tracking back to historical feminism basis, the women's liberation movement of the 1960's and 1970's, the word "liberated" lost much of its authentic meaning. Muslims could easily understand from such experiences that the liberation warriors were employing a strategy to disrupt and dismantle Muslims' cultural structures and their living values. During this period of profound crisis, imported clothing, culture, ways of life, etiquettes, and conducts were adopted, and all-out efforts were made to shape the Western patterns of Muslim culture. Similarly, many religious leaders believe that the construction of normativity related to Muslim women's identity as it was articulated within the social and discursive boundaries of the Muslim community was based on conformity to a standardized religious and social identity that was imbued with the weight of religious authority and Divine sanction, and thus was not open to social negotiation. Some of the key elements form some of the selected posters of Aurat March have generated these themes that are more or less similar to notions of gendered segregation, transnational narratives, and indigenous orientations in terms of representation of women's victimization:

1. Veil, Female code of Dress:
 - Dupatta itna pasand hai tou apni ankhun pe bandh lu (If you like the headscarf that much then wrap it around your eyes).
 - Mera Jism meri Marzi (My Body My Choice)

- Get your laws off my body

The treatment of women, the veil, and gender segregation all have come to occupy centre stage once again. The wearing of the veil in outer world is consistently perceived as women segregation and subordination in many of the Western and some non-Western countries. It has been shown and still continue that it is basically the “backwardness of Islam. Currently, old wine in new bottles is being observed in the Muslim world. Muslim feminists and secular women’s rights advocates even took aim at the transformation of Muslim women’s dress code. Many radical feminist’ readings equated the veil and covering of the head with authoritarianism, isolation, subordination, and, in some cases, oppression. Simultaneously, Western media and literature has been a staunch supporter of Muslim women’s liberation in order to enhance women’s position by protesting to veil and exhorting on their plight. Postcolonial feminists criticise Western feminists for universalizing and homogenising women's issues without taking into account cultural, racial, religious, and imperial considerations, and feeling that their work is actually addressing the concerns of all women around the world. Nonetheless, women are veiled does not necessarily mean that they are miserable, victimized or inactive. Riffat Hassan observed that;

“Much attention has been focused, in the Western media and the literature, on the sorry plight of Muslim women who are “poor and depressed” in visible or tangible ways. Hardly any notice has been taken, however, of the profound tragedy and trauma suffered by the self-aware Muslim women who are struggling to maintain their religious identity and personal autonomy in the face of both the imperialism of Western, secular culture and the intransigence of Islamic traditional culture.”

To claim their own representation over the discursive processes that dictate how their bodies are narrated, defined, and regulated, Muslim women must navigate between these reductionists and essentialized perspectives. Furthermore, representatives of the religious right have acknowledged that males need to be educated about women’s demands, raising knowledge of the rights granted by Islam. They see the women’s movement, on the other hand, as consisting exclusively of women from wealthy families whose demands are limited to choosing to wear revealing garments and move freely without regard for social or religious traditions, and with no effort to “uplift” women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This is the fact where the disparity reveals between typical scripted slogan enchanters and actual human rights workers.

2. Stereotypical Image of Muslim Women.

- Oppressors are still the same, men, military and mullah(clerics).
- Maa behn ku maarta mujh per Islam jharhta (You beat mother and sister while imposing Islam on me)

- Main 9 sal ki the wo 50 sal ka. Mjhy chup karwa dia gya aur us ki awaz aaj be masjid main gonjti hai (I was nine years old, he was fifty years old. They made me silent, and his voice still booms in Mosque).

In general perception, it has been drawn that female subjugation and social inequality in the ‘repressive’ Islamic patriarchal system wherein Muslim women exist as ‘slaves’ predominantly. To realize their existence as free human beings they need to throw

away the “religious chains” that usurp their essential humanity. Through this specific understanding of religion and the culture of Islam, they propagate a sweepingly negative view of ordinary Muslims and their religious faith. Many intellectuals around the world, stereotype and calls the teachings of Islam as oppressive, subordinated, and ancient (incompatible in modern times).

The stereotypical image of women is actually having no existence in Islamic periphery except in sensationalizing news, literature and reports which interconnect everything with religion due to some non-practicing followers’ deeds. It definitely shows the less knowledge of Islam and its profound equitable teachings. So is the case with Pakistani women’s rights activists now. In Pakistan, among elite women, western dress code is considered as modern dressing style irrespective of their different culture and religious limitations. They are the one, who are politicizing the veil and dressing code of Muslims just for the sake of their own dressing interests. These elite women at public spaces expressed so clearly their frustration against enriched values to change it with modern standards of current world. Even they have witnessed women body politics, its objectification and the result in the shape of frustration around the world in between the last century. Given the context, these voices are playing a big role in multiplying the complexities not for the country women only but specifically for those who already bearing gendered Islamophobia in non-Muslims countries.

3. Otherness and microaggression.

- Men can smoke why can’t I?
- Lo baith gai sahih se (Now I am seated correctly)
- Akeli, Awara, Azaad (Alone, Wanderer, Liberated)

The present perception of alienation is a powerful tool of male dominance and a significant impediment to gender specific roles freedom in any society. It shows that identity of females is constructed by men to serve their own interests. Women are thereby presented as the other sex. Otherness seeks to examine how majority and minority identities are constructed. The present concept has been taken from the work of feminist Simone De Beauviour, who has been considered as the pioneer of second wave of feminism in Western countries. In a study, it is illustrated that Pakistani woman have always lived a status of the “second citizen” as Simone De Beauviour portrayed women in her book as ‘female otherness’. They are put outside the borders of current global civilizational mindset, where a legitimate public space for proclaiming and expressing their faith, embedded in local cultural traditions, is prohibited. From an ideological standpoint, it appears that global ideology, which is comparable to racism and colonialism in theory, function, and goal, preserves and promotes negative ascriptions and subaltern positions to its victims as an inferior social entity. This shows that women are exploited through patriarchy and women are considered as something inferior, subjugated beings, and have to spend their entire life with certain imposed limitations. This is what Western media, and some literary narratives express about Pakistani women, and this is also what again represented by young Pakistani activists. Furthermore, Western liberal feminism serves as a screen masking the reframing of an old colonialist trope, that of “white men saving brown

women from brown men. By applying it here, our modern brown women's rights activists are actually saving brown women from brown men through transnational feminist tales.

By analyzing above-mentioned demands of Aurat March, reveals that typical terrible things (smoking, wandering, sitting indecently) if are done by males, so we too want to do that beyond realizing its vagueness and inappropriateness. During this, we forget one thing that these activists were securing their own needs and gains at that time which cannot be equally adopted and might not be suitable to all cultures' need globally. Such rallies and marches can contribute to women's development, but through productive approach and positive way. Such an important issues related woman's life cannot be mocked out like this for fun or to gain attention on social or electronic media. Although, there were many of the placards that were depicting the true position and the factual issues, but just because of some vague placards they even lost their significance.

Religion does not generate misogyny, patriarchy, male dominance, and other social ills. Islam as a root cause to injustices, women suppression, and subordination is just a representation due to unfamiliarity with Islamic teachings. Negative stereotypes and inexplicable remarks towards Muslim women dressing are not confined to non-Muslims societies now. Even in many of the Muslim societies, judgemental behaviour towards Islamic code of dress (oppressive) and ridiculous remarks by some of secular and modern elite class are often noted. The reason is not that they are less informed of Islamic values instead they are more inclined to modern enlightened ideas and a kind of megalomaniacs. There is a need to understand the cultural and religious differences of Muslim countries to those of western countries. It is not possible for every country, religion and culture to adopt and change once values by following blindly transnational rules or laws. We should know our legal boundaries, our cultural limitations and our religious values.

Representing Global and Acting Local: The Aurat March

Women's rights as human rights are a product of human rights frameworks that reveals the connections of information, diverse reflections, and power dynamics that further pushes these discourses into geopolitics. Many of the placards were not only critically evaluated by the general public on social media, but also by different television and film stars, political and religious personals and other well-known personalities. It is to be mentioned here, many of the senior women's rights activists isolated themselves from bold posters which shows that indirectly they have confirmed the indecency of posters and rejected it out rightly. It also depicts that many of the seniors' women rights activists agree that feminist activism should be in limits. Many others consider these bold posters as start of sexuality and sexual politics in Pakistan openly in public sphere. For example, Zia argues that these were powerful reminders of a deeply entrenched religio-cultural patriarchal privilege that is jealously guarded in Pakistan;

"Most of these objectionable posters were challenging male norms of propriety and sexual harassment and some even carried refrains of LGBTQ+ politics,

unprecedented in Pakistan's public sphere. Consistent with their record, the women of religious organisations of the Minhajul Quran and the Jamaat-e-Islami outright condemned and despaired at the International Women's Day Aurat March—an event that otherwise the women's wing of the Jamaat has historically supported and celebrated in its own framing of women's rights”.

The actual concern is not now either the posters were powerful reminders of “deeply entrenched religio-cultural patriarchal privilege” or not but how they are powerfully distracting the actual women's miseries in Pakistani society is worth bothering about. Those who are concerned about women's progress, eventually they will realize that most of Aurat March slogans were not representing the reflection of collective and individual's life issues. Sexism, racism and oppression is experienced in non-Western world is not parallel to that of women in the Western world. Therefore, the Aurat March activists or the women's rights activists are trying to build an empire of multicultural, multireligious and multiregional which might be eye-catching for a group of people but not serving the interests of entire nation and it sadly fails to address the sensitivities of real victim women. Furthermore, the need is to create a distinction between genuine issues from those of sensationalized and adopted one; “It is also the most palatable feminism for our mediatised age and one whose stories are most easily spectacularised for consumption by Western audiences eager to learn about, then pity, the suffering of both geographically remote and internally distanced “others”. It is this now neoliberal feminist formation that works in lockstep with Western imperial designs and interventions in the global south (specifically Muslim lands)—to fight for “women's rights”. Part of that “fight” takes the form of sensationalising via media spectacularism cases that highlight the “individual heroism” of “feminist voices”.

International funding for domestically headquartered NGOs engaged in education, advocacy, service provision, revenue-generating, research and documentation, and, on occasion, protest movements is one kind of transnationalism. The influence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on women's movements has sparked heated controversies. The feminists and women's rights activism in Pakistan also experienced mixed reactions of support, mistrust, anger, hate and electronic and social media backlash during recent years. As a result, Pakistan is certainly not the only nation that associates feminist efforts with Westernization. Women activists in various transnational areas have been charged of assisting with Western imperialism in recent years by importing alien ideas and practices and spreading them across society. This is what Mohanty called “ethnocentric” behaviour. While criticising she evaluates either its Western feminist scholarship or third world women's scholarship living in West regarding third world women through the implication of all women as a homogeneous population without distinction based on religion, race, culture, class, or environment is irrational. This is what, needs re-evaluation and categorization while reconsidering gender in terms of religion, race and culture. If third worlds

culture and traditions cannot be imported to West, how an unfamiliar cultural transformation to third world or any land can be implemented? Further, the increased presence of Islam in the cultural context of Muslim nations must be understood in relation to colonization and, more recently, the securitization of empire. Under contemporary socio-political conditions, Islam is politicized as anti-women's rights and antidemocratic reform, and Pakistan is narrativized as oppressive. The result is an 'othering' of feminist discourse in Pakistani national politics. Charania profoundly concludes her work namely "Will the real Pakistani woman please stand up? But as signifiers of the charged complexity of Pakistani national identity, these visual subjects demonstrate ambiguous allegiance towards insurgent violence, gender and national boundaries. She further analysis:

"Shifting the visual monolith from a single idiomatic discourse about the other to one that is perhaps more accurately framed as rhizomatic, extending tentacles and filaments through various points of power and pleasure (e.g., brown bodies, erotic violence and white hope) and ruptures the "truth" of sight, splintering into complexity. To rupture the "truth" of these representations opens a point of entry into unnamed, unidentified forms of freedom, a point around which a different kind of subjectivity might crystallize. The comfort, consolation, contentment, ease, and even enjoyment of these visual practices of and about Pakistan must be considered in this light."

Whereas the self-empowerment concept does seem appealing in the face of intransigent, corrupted government apparatuses, its instrumentalization (as with human rights and women's rights) in the service of neoliberal ideologies of privatisation and retrenchment of social services, which shifts the emphasis aside from 'addressing the root causes of structural inequalities' and toward a could indeed ethic of individual success, is what needs to be debunked. It is argued by some critics that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) diffuse feminist activity because of donor funds and agendas. Others who may share some of these concerns see specific NGOs as critical to the continuation of feminist efforts, feel women rights activists may resist sponsorships, and are concerned about rising government limitations on financing for women's rights NGOs. Playing on the name of religion, women and culture are neither serving the national interests nor individual victims are going to gain something productive.

Conclusion

The best and foremost need is to tackle the current concerns by relying on country people's support through healthy needful activities. The Aurat march can play a better role in scrutinizing their placards in coming marches. They can be more focused, more productive and can definitely play an active role by considering the needs of local while living in locals. Interestingly, state, religion and humanity are not a plaything. The nation of Pakistan has already bore much loss and restrictions because of the interests of others. The image of the country where many of women living, safe and secure life cannot be sensationalized by some examples and stereotypes association. At least,

women's card, women's piety and individual heroism is no more striking notions, ultimately putting on stake the mass women population's deep-rooted apprehensions.

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