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Reception of Feminism in Contemporary Pakistan: Deconstructing Public Narrative and Voices of Opposition

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Abstract

In contemporary Pakistan, feminism is still viewed with a sense of stigma by the majority. Amidst the prevalent fear of the emerging feminist narrative, the *'Aurat March'* (Women's March), a series of awareness marches, emerges as a significant force promoting feminist principles. However, the '*Aurat March*' movement has encountered considerable resistance from various groups in Pakistan, including religious scholars, conservative political groups, and even the general public, who believe the movement to be Western propaganda contributing to undermining the country's religious and socio-cultural foundations. Against this backdrop, the present research investigates the general public's perspective regarding the modern feminist narrative in Pakistan. By using a textual analysis framework derived from Fairclough (1989), Janks (1997), and Berger (1998), this research examines linguistic and thematic elements of public discourse in the form of comments and responses on the 'Aurat March' coverage content on social media, to analyze resistance against feminism in contemporary Pakistan. The findings of the study shed light on the persisting resistance against the modern feminist narrative in Pakistan, and offer insights crucial for activists and scholars involved in gender equality initiatives. The study is significant as it contributes to understanding the reasons behind resistance and helps encourage constructive dialogue.

Keywords: Aurat March, Public Narrative, Taboo Discourses, Gender Equality, Feminist Discourses, Linguistic Analysis, Discourse Analysis

Introduction: Modern Feminism and its Reception in Pakistan

The *Aurat March*, translated as *'women's march'*, is a series of annual awareness marches concerning women's rights and is held across various cities in Pakistan. Since 2018, it has been aligned with International Women's Day and has snowballed into a movement that not only includes women's rights but also those of transgenders, improved legislation for women, implementation of the same laws, and raising awareness with attitude change. A large number of individuals, including numerous women and some men, have since then actively engaged in articulating their demands for fundamental rights. Women's demands are cantered on the right to individual autonomy and the freedom to exist without fear. The March's demands center on the

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changes that must occur for women to feel secure in society, whether it is for laws and protection against workplace harassment and domestic abuse or the ability for women to enter public places without fear. These requests are specifically relevant to the rights of working-class women and domestic workers. Women want protection from child labour, equal pay for equal work, and an end to honor killings.

Meanwhile, the *Aurat March* has gained substantial momentum on social media, resulting in widespread negative reactions, and effectively transforming online spaces into arenas of conflicting debates. Feminists assert that the Aurat March's powerful reception can be attributed to its numerous distinctions from the earlier versions of the feminist movement in Pakistan (Dosa, 2022). Through Aurat March, the feminists confronted their experiences in society, bringing up ideas of sexuality and body autonomy in public, a topic that was taboo before (Batool & Malik, 2021). Many Pakistanis view the slogans used in these marches as offensive, believing that they are against Islamic and cultural values. While the march essentially advocates for gender equality, this is not the general sentiment of the people in Pakistan as it contradicts their social and cultural values. There has been a rise in discussions regarding the movement, with emphasis on its impact on young people, majorly due to the controversial slogan of this movement which is, ***'My body, my choice***'. Critics argue that this view could be interpreted as a certification of unrestricted sexual behaviour for women, which contrasts with dominant socio-cultural and religious principles in Pakistan. The women raising the slogans are frequently attacked as shameless, and they are said to reflect the goal of the liberal elite rather than that of the real women of Pakistan (Kelso, 2024). A nationwide discussion about women's rights, gendered social norms, and the presence of women in public spaces in the Islamic Republic was sparked by images of the activists and their catchphrases, which quickly garnered popularity on Pakistani social media (Ebrahim, 2019).

Each year, the public's reaction to the Aurat March is inconsistent and split. This movement, along with its organizers and supporters, has encountered considerable challenges despite its success in sparking discussions about gender inequality in Pakistan and garnering support both domestically and globally. However, a majority of the general Pakistanis label the march's organizers and protesters as blasphemous or vulgar, while others consider the Aurat March as an extension of Western culture. Aurat March's ideology and popular slogans criticizing inequity and sexism transformed Pakistani society's perception of women. Feminists claim that because the Aurat March is unique from previous feminist initiatives in Pakistan, it has received a tremendous amount of support. The initial Aurat March only called for a few specific changes or rights, but it also offered a platform for discussing women's experiences in society, body autonomy, rights in public and private settings, and a host of other topics that the early feminist groups did not touch. Because women are helpless in homes and public places, the Aurat March effectively highlights all forms of oppression against them. The recognition of the deep-rooted structural issues led to

a shift in the history of women's aspirations and wants. Marches generated a narrative that targeted society as a whole, including households, and as a result, many groups within society felt attacked and responded negatively.

Research Scope, Issue, and Significance

Existing research primarily addresses the **surface-level opposition** to the Aurat March and feminism in Pakistan. However, there is limited focus on how discourse structures such as linguistic choices, framing, and thematic elements reveal underlying ideological power dynamics and contested identities within Pakistani society. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the linguistic features of public responses to feminism. It investigates how these textual and discursive practices both reflect and reinforce broader socio-cultural and religious ideologies regarding gender.

The study analyzes the impact of language and discourse on the promotion and negotiation of thought patterns and ideals, examining how social realities are shaped through language. The study examines the response of the general Pakistani public to the Aurat March feminist discourse, providing insights into how feminism is perceived in contemporary Pakistan. Through a sociolinguistic analysis, the study offers an in-depth analysis of the controversial reception of feminism in Pakistan by exploring the voices of opposition. Through the understanding of the public opinion of the Aurat March feminist campaign, this research comprehensively captures the general public sentiment regarding feminism in Pakistan. It reveals diverse opinions and concerns within society, crucial for policymakers, activists, and scholars engaging in gender equality and women's rights discussions. The findings reflect public sentiment and facilitate informed discussions on feminist issues. The findings have social implications in Pakistan, bridging gaps between social groups and fostering constructive dialogue. Overall, this research explores the views and opinions of the general Pakistani public and aims to examine the causes of the fierce resistance that the Aurat March feminists encountered in Pakistan. It also contributes to feminist scholarship and acts as a resource for activists, policymakers, and society, fostering an understanding of feminist dynamics in Pakistan.

Aim of the Research and Research Questions

This research investigates how language negotiates identities and studies the perception of feminism among the general Pakistani public. Through discourse analysis, it aims to examine the reception of feminist discursive practices and narratives in Pakistan. In line with this aim the following research questions are designed:

Q.1. What ideological standpoints and power structures are embedded within the primary and secondary discourse of public responses to the contemporary feminist narrative in Pakistan?

Q.2. What linguistic aspects of discourse are employed in response to the emerging feminist discourse in Pakistan, and how do these textual and thematic discourses mirror the broader ideological perspectives held by the Pakistani populace?

Review of the Literature

Aurat March and its Role in Pakistani Feminism

While women have been involved in activism in Pakistan since its founding, the country has experienced a different kind of activism since 2018 through the Aurat March (Khushbakht & Sultana, 2020). *Aurat March*, (women's march), a series of women's rights awareness marches in Pakistan since its inception in 2018, is inspired by the global #MeToo movement. The movement has grown over time, advocating for transgender rights, better laws for women's protection, and promoting attitude change. The Aurat March embodies an ongoing narrative of the feminist struggle in Pakistan, albeit with notable divergences. Scholars such as Chowdhury and Basit (2018); Saigol (2019); Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987); Zia (2019); Saeed (2020) & Akhtar (2022), have meticulously documented the feminist movement in Pakistan, highlighting its complexities and evolutions. Aurat March has not only gained significant public attention as a resistance movement over the past few years but also encouraged various academic discussions (Khan, 2022). Since its inception, the Aurat March movement has garnered support and criticism alike and has become an important cultural phenomenon for both its supporters and critics (Saigol & Chaudhry, 2020). Rehman (2019) is of the view that the Aurat March feminist movement in Pakistan signifies a significant milestone in the continued feminist struggle in the country. The movement is a step towards promoting a contemporary feminist stance that contests the prevalent silence on the crucial concerns of sexual autonomy and power.

The Aurat March has been called the fourth-wave feminist movement by Saigol and Chaudhry (2020) who also highlight its use of digital media platforms for mobilization. To Raina (2017), feminism is an exemplification of women's struggle for social, economic, political, and personal equality. Feminism holds diverse ideologies, accounts, and political tendencies, all working together towards achieving justice and women's equality in all walks of life. Dosa (2022) has also described the feminist movement in Pakistan as a symbol of courage and change. She presents it as a platform for mobilizing communities, fostering inclusive solidarity, and advancing intersectional feminism in Pakistan, particularly in the face of challenges confronting civil society and activism.

Iqbal (2020) elaborates on the two primary strands of feminism in Pakistan: Islamic and secular. Secular feminists aim to eradicate oppression and challenge patriarchy, while Islamic feminism promotes women's participation within the framework of

Islamic principles. However, according to the general perception in Pakistan, within the Aurat March campaign discourse, one distinctive aspect is its use of contentious slogans that some Pakistanis find offensive due to their departure from the country's socio-cultural, and religious norms. Subsequently, following the 2021 Aurat March protests, legal petitions were filed against the organizers, accusing them of cultural disruption (Shah, 2020). Zia (2022: p.2) argues 'The Aurat March organizers' lack of conceptual or political preparation has landed them in a predictable religio-patriarchal trap that could have been avoided if they had cultivated ideological and strategic clarity in equal measure to their creative performative politics.'

Critics, including conservatives and Islamic feminists, have disparagingly labeled the movement as a 'Westernized' and 'alien' concept, aiming to discredit local norms. Shaheed highlighted how Pakistani society tends to perceive women engaged in women's movements as detached from their societies, and this perception needs to be vigorously challenged (Shaheed, 2010). Critics of the Aurat March movement brand the campaign as overtly liberal and influenced by the West, accusing it of promoting 'anti-men' sentiments in Pakistan. Bari & Khattak (2001) critique the feminist movement, noting its stagnation since the 1980s, attributing this to the rise of NGOs and government co-optation of its policies. Batool and Malik (2021) also contend that within Pakistan, the feminist movement encounters controversy and criticism, frequently depicted as an external imposition by privileged women who reject traditional values. Opponents posit that it represents a Western scheme to destabilize Islamic society, primarily benefiting urban elites. Right-wing factions and numerous men are opposed to it, perceiving feminists as misandrists striving for dominance. These extreme perspectives undermine the movement's legitimacy, dismissing its call for equality as a pursuit of power. Consequently, many moderate women distance themselves from the movement due to its controversial slogans.

Discourse and its Sociological Significance

The controversies surrounding Pakistani feminism are deeply intertwined with the discourses shaping societal perceptions and responses. These discourses are not merely linguistic expressions but are deeply entrenched with gender ideologies, power dynamics, and cultural norms. Understanding the complexities of these controversies necessitates an examination of how discourses construct and reinforce societal understandings of gender roles, women's agency, and cultural authenticity. The term *discourse* encompasses the ideologies and belief systems conveyed within texts (He, 2001). Hodge and Kress (2001) distinguish between the concepts of text and discourse, stating that discourse is a social process in which texts are rooted, while the text itself is the tangible object produced through discourse. Despite being present in various texts, discourses extend beyond the individual texts they are embedded within (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Discourse is fundamentally a social activity, representing language with sociological characteristics (Wetherell, 2001).

Howarth believes discourse to be "synonymous with the entire social system, in which discourses literally constitute the social and political world" (Howarth, 2002, p. 2). Gee (2005) defines discourse as "language (oral or written) in use with more socio-politically oriented meaning" (p.1). Phillips and Hardy (2002) highlight the interconnection of discourse, text, and social reality, suggesting that analyzing individual texts is crucial to comprehend the relationship between discourse and social reality. Yates (2001) emphasizes the importance of social backgrounds in the process of meaning-making within discourses. Language use is deeply rooted in a 'context of situation,' and utterances gain comprehension and significance only within this specific 'context of situation' (p.82).

Defining discourse about social contexts, Jaworski and Coupland (2006) states that discourse is, "language use relative to social, political and cultural formations- it is language reflecting social order but also language shaping social order, and shaping individuals' interaction with society" (p.3). Therefore, it can be inferred that discourses act as reflections of the socio-cultural contexts in which they emerge and circulate. They not only mirror the social and cultural norms of their originating society but also influence those realities by generating and disseminating social narratives. Discourses extend beyond the texts that form them (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). The primary discourse pertains to the textual implications at the surface level, while the secondary discourses refer to the embedded ideas about social relationships that may not be evident on the surface. O'Barr (1994), contends that to conduct an ideological analysis of texts, one must also examine the 'secondary discourses' present within the texts. Therefore, when studying discourse, it is essential to include the sociological implications for analysis, as discourse itself is an active process of meaning-making in social life (Wetherell et al., 2001).

Research Methodology and Analytical Framework

Data Collection and Time Frame

The study scrutinizes comments and discussions made by the general Pakistani public in response to the coverage of Aurat March processions on the official Facebook pages of the Aurat March organizers and proponents. The data includes comments and discussions posted on the official Facebook pages of the Aurat March organizers spanning from 2018 to 2022. The primary objective is to gain insights into the general public's perception of feminism in Pakistan.

Research Approach and Procedures of Analysis

The current research focuses on analyzing discourse, including its textual and visual aspects, along with social implications and contexts. The analysis utilizes a set of

parameters derived from Fairclough (1989), Janks (1997) & Berger (1998), as presented in Table 1, to guide the examination of linguistic and thematic features in the text.

Sr. No.	Parameters of Study in Textual Analysis
i.	Pictures and images
ii.	Semiotic signs and symbols and their significance
iii.	Codes used
iv.	Lexical and grammatical patterns
v.	Use of selective voice
vi.	Use of words/phrases with specific connotations[1]
vii.	Tag lines/ Topics
viii.	Modality (tone)
ix.	Presuppositions[2]
x.	Hinting at certain issues
xi.	Agency[3] (information about the power relations); Nominalization (information about agents of power)
xii.	Ideologically significant words denoting ideological and sociological matters

Table 1: Parameters of Study in Textual Analysis (Umar, 2016, p. 74)

Applying these parameters in textual analysis, the research delves into the language used in the data to investigate how the public in Pakistan responds to the feminist narrative. The parameters serve as criteria for studying and interpreting the communication patterns within the dataset, aiding in the exploration of public sentiments regarding feminist perspectives and issues.

[1] Chandler (2002) defines *Connotations* as "the socio-cultural and 'personal' associations produced as a reader decodes a text. The term also refers to the relationship between the signifier and its signified" (p. 225).

[2] Goddard believes that *presupposition* are "all about reading between lines; since this is, as it suggests, a hidden process, it is very interesting to advertisers, as we can be taking in all sorts of assumptions without consciously paying attention to them." (1998, p. 125)

[3] Agency reveals the active performer of actions and is typically emphasized in a text through the use of active verbs.

Analysis and Discussion: Deconstructing Public Narrative and Voices of Opposition

This section concentrates on the examination of linguistic and semiotic attributes, along with their sociological ramifications, employed in the responses of the Pakistani populace to the feminist narrative propagated by the Aurat March campaign materials.

Sarcasm, Sexism, and Skepticism

The responses from the public to the Aurat March feminist discourse can be understood through the lens of Fairclough's (1989) critical discourse analysis, which explores how language reflects and reinforces power relations within a given society. The public's sarcastic, skeptical, and sexist responses, as analyzed in the data, can be seen as manifestations of underlying power structures in Pakistani society that resist challenges to traditional gender norms. The feminist narrative, as presented through the *Aurat March* campaign discourse, has encountered sarcasm from the general public in Pakistan. The responses of the Pakistani public to the contemporary feminist discourse not only include sarcasm but also feature skepticism, cynicism, and sexism.



Figure 1: A Tribute to the Late Female Pakistani Prime Minister

Figure 1 displays an image of the late ex-prime minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, the only woman prime minister of Pakistan. The image shared in the Aurat March campaign pays tribute to her bravery and strength, relating it to common women in Pakistan. The quote by Bhutto, inscribed on the picture, voices feminist concerns about the challenges faced by women. The caption of the image, '***A little tribute to the resilient Benazir Bhutto who would've been 67 today — with some iconic words that will resonate with us and women everywhere'*** remembers the late prime minister as heroic, using words such as '***resilient***' and ***'iconic'***. It also highlights relational values, by the use of the words, *'**resonate with us and women everywhere**',* establishing a connection between the audience and the strength of the late woman

prime minister. However, the interesting aspect that captures the observer's attention is the public's response to the text. A noteworthy comment states, ***'She inherited the position from her father who was a feudal lord. And also she made a pact with a dictator'***. Such responses reflect a general viewpoint of skepticism and resistance to easy impressiveness. The public appears skeptical and offers counterarguments using words with negative connotations expressing sarcasm. They contrast words having positive meanings such as ***'iconic'*** and ***'resilient'*** with negatively connotated terms such as '***inherited***', '***feudal lord***', and ***'pact with a dictator***'. Another comment asks *'**Why are you people so unbelievably ignorant?**'*, implying that her supporters are ignorant. Consequently, expressive and experiential texts by the producers on social media face opposition due to the public's contrasting views towards the Aurat March feminist discourse.

The public responses to the feminist discourse exhibit not only sarcasm but also cynicism. Figure 2, features a post shared by one of the feminist pages, praising Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai.

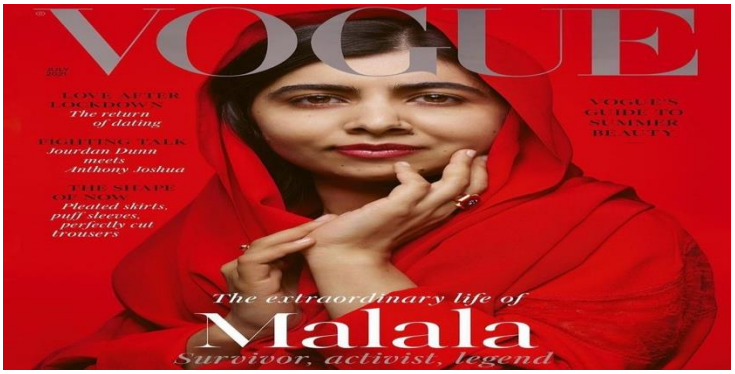


Figure 2: Malala Yousafzai's Vogue Cover

The image shows the cover of Vogue, paying tribute to Malala Yousafzai, to which a female commenter expresses, ***'I have a feeling Malala is not Our girl anymore'***. Another calls her a ***'Good actor. She's not our girl. She has a HUGE platform yet she chose to stay silent about the TERRORISM of Israel. She is a symbol of diplomacy as she is a hypocrite'.*** This shows that the general public opinion about Malala in Pakistan suggests that she is no longer viewed favorably and criticizes her for staying silent on certain political issues worldwide in general and in Pakistan in particular, where her voice could have raised awareness. These responses show differing perceptions of heroism and grace, not aligning with what the modern feminist discourse in Pakistan proposes. Berger's (1998) semiotic analysis aids in deconstructing the visual elements of the campaign, such as the images of Benazir Bhutto (Fig. 1) and Malala Yousafzai (Fig. 2), to reveal the contrast between the intended feminist message and the public's interpretations. The use of sarcasm and

skepticism in public comments serves as a tool to undermine the feminist message, reinforcing dominant patriarchal ideologies while masking them in humorous or cynical expressions. This integration of theory provides a deeper understanding of how language and visuals in discourse are not only sites of meaning-making but also battlegrounds where ideological conflicts play out.

Sexist responses are also frequently observed in public reactions, possibly used to counter unwelcome gender and social narratives. Figure 3 displays some of these sexist comments aimed at women.



Figure 3: Aurat March Participants

In Figure 3, a picture of young female participants of the *Aurat March* holding placards to express their viewpoints is displayed. A comment on the post reads, ***'Ladies please go to your home and wash dishes'***, which is a sexist remark that stereotypes women and restricts their roles in society to domestic tasks. The statement presupposes that the place of women in the Pakistani society is in the kitchen. Another male member comments, ***'I don't have time to read, but woman detected opinion rejected'.*** Such sexist responses reveal the general perception of women in society, suggesting that their opinions are not valued or trusted. The assertive tone and power dynamics in the comment establish modality in the discourse and further emphasize the male's assumed dominance in the gender binary arrangement. The firm dismissal of the feminist narrative, accompanied by a sexist reply, highlights the prevailing perception of the public regarding women, suggesting that their main role revolves around domestic responsibilities. A closer examination of the underlying discourse in this statement reveals a modality where the speaker's confident tone establishes a sense of authority within the text. Moreover, the speaker assumes control and influence by stating, ***'I don't have time to read but...'***. This statement highlights the gendered power dynamics in Pakistan that favor males assuming superior positions. The unambiguous and assertive declaration encapsulated in the phrase, '***woman detected opinion rejected***', carries a profound implication that in

Pakistan male perspectives habitually dismiss and diminish the value of women's viewpoints. This succinct statement not only communicates a categorical refusal to consider a woman's opinion but also conveys an underlying bias that favors male perspectives over those of women.

Catchphrases- Transgressing Religio-Cultural Boundaries

The primary factor contributing to the rejection of the Aurat March feminist narrative by the general public is its use of controversial slogans. Men, in particular, find the collective voice of women fighting for their rights unsettling. The slogans employed in the Aurat March discourse challenge the traditional beliefs and ideologies upheld by the patriarchal society, resulting in strong disapproval from the public. Several slogans from the data have attracted significant backlash. Examining some of the slogans from the data reveals that these particular expressions have garnered the most significant backlash from the public.



Figure 4: Satire on Societal Expectations

Janks offers a framework for understanding the semiotic aspects of discourse, focusing on the significance of signs and symbols. Applying Janks' approach, the analysis of both visual and textual elements of the slogans reveals how they resist societal norms. For example, the slogan depicted in Figure 4 employs semiotic signs to challenge traditional behavioural expectations of propriety imposed on women, thereby highlighting the tension between feminist messages and cultural norms. Figure 4 presents an illustration on a placard, depicting a girl seated with her legs apart. The inscription on the placard reads, ***'Lo, beth gayi sahi se',*** which translates to ***'Here you go, I just sat properly, happy now?'*** The text and image collectively serve as a satire on societal expectations of proper behaviour, particularly regarding how women should sit with their legs closed and display modesty. An in-depth analysis of the secondary discourse shows that the true feminist woman is a breaker of set rules related to propriety. She boldly rebels against the standards based on patriarchy imposed upon her gender. Figure 5 shows another widely recognized slogan from the Aurat March campaign:



Figure 5: Challenging Established Norms

The placard shown in Figure 5 displays another conflicting slogan from the Aurat March campaign, which reads, ***'Khud khana garam kr lo'***, translated as ***'Heat your food yourself'*** in English. This straightforward statement carries a strong message targeting the longstanding patriarchal norms in Pakistan. By applying Fairclough's parameters, focusing on the relationship between language and power, and the use of modality, the study reveals how the message in the slogan is aimed at challenging the prevalent patriarchal norms in Pakistan. It is a message for the men of the family who expect all the household chores to be done by the women in the family, as is the custom. This statement directly addresses men who expect to be served warm food prepared by the women of the house. This slogan has received significant criticism from the general public, who have expressed strong disapproval of this narrative promoted by the Aurat March feminist discourse. The slogan has faced significant backlash and received a strong reaction from the public on social media. The counterargument holds that this narrative only tries to destabilize the traditional family structure rooted in cherished familial bonds. Hence the public expresses their disapproval and argues that instead of advocating for women's rights and empowerment, the movement only works to dismantle the valued traditional gender roles in Pakistani society. Consequently, the slogan faced an outright rejection from men and women alike, the men and women who value the patriarchal structure of the family. Another slogan that surfaced during the campaign that aims to challenge social norms and cultural practices entrenched in Pakistan's patriarchal landscape reads, ***'Mujhey kya pata tumhara moza kahan hai?'***, translated into English as ***'How would I know where your sock is?'***. The slogan boldly confronts the societal expectations that assume women to be the ones confined to domestic roles of cooking, cleaning, and serving their husbands and children. The slogan satirizes men who depend on the women in their family for all their domestic needs, from cooking them meals to providing them with clean clothes and other household comforts. This shows that the contemporary Pakistani feminist discourse aims at rejecting the long-standing expectations of behaviour and roles traditionally associated with women.

Figures 6 and 7 display slogans categorized as controversial, eliciting negative feedback from the public:



Figure 6: Bold Slogans

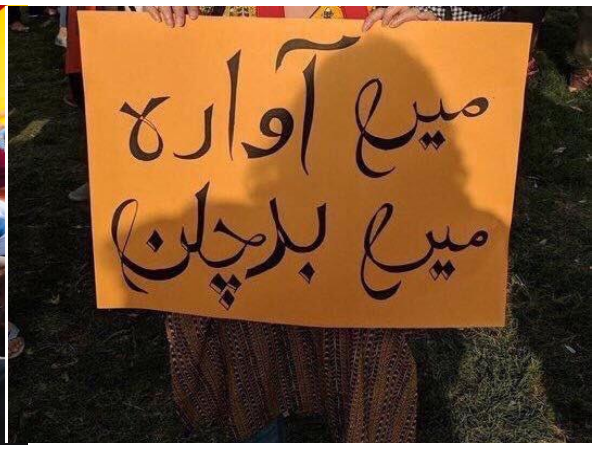


Figure 7: Controversial Catchphrases

Figure 6 depicts a woman participating in the march, brandishing a placard on which is written in Urdu, ***'Gandi nazar teri, aur chaar deewari meri'***, translated in English as ***'You have an impure gaze, but it is I who have to be confined within four walls.'*** This slogan boldly challenges the prevalent social practice of restricting women's mobility to avoid potential harassment and unwanted attention from men. It aims to foster a safer environment for women by questioning the pervasive male gaze. However, this particular slogan received criticism from certain quarters. In response to the controversy, an alternative slogan surfaced, as depicted in Figure 7. This new slogan as written on the placard in Urdu states, ***'Mein awara, mein banchan'***. The translation of this slogan into English reads, ***'Yes, I am wayward; Yes, I am loose.'*** The slogan tends to urge women to disregard societal norms and restrictions imposed on them by encouraging them to break free from the limitations set by society and embrace their independence. However, this message has received significant criticism owing to the negative connotations attached to the words ***'wayward'*** and ***'loose'***, specifically in Pakistani society. As a result, many have accused the feminist discourse of promoting wayward behaviour among women in society and voiced concerns about the perceived objectionable nature of the slogans, highlighting a perceived inconsistency with religious and cultural values.

Challenges and Concerns: Foreign Associations and Political Agendas

The theoretical framework for the current study, grounded in the critical discourse analysis approaches by Fairclough (1989), Janks (1997) & Berger (1998), provides

essential insight into understanding the opposition to feminist discourse in Pakistan. By applying Fairclough's notion of power dynamics and Janks' focus on sociocultural context, the analysis uncovers how language reflects the underlying social structures that resist the feminist narrative. One of the perceptions of the general public regarding the contemporary feminist movement in Pakistan is that it is driven by political motivations and receives foreign funding, consequently serving external interests and lacking effectiveness. The public's comments on the feminist narrative indicate a prevailing sense of distrust toward the movement. A female commenter asserts, ***'Aurat March is another American-funded organization. Always standing up for the causes which do not have anything to do with the suffering of women. #AuratMarchExposed'.*** The statement reveals the commenter's skeptical viewpoint towards the feminist movement through the use of experiential values in the text and reflects the general public perception of the movement's ineffectiveness and lack of purpose. The expression ***'another organization funded by Americans'*** implies the existence of other foreign-backed movements in Pakistan, which are also disapproved of by the general public. This highlights the public's doubt regarding the effectiveness of the Aurat March campaign and raises questions about its capacity to enact substantial change or achieve its desired objectives. Such responses highlight the negative reception of the feminist narrative in Pakistan.

Increasingly, a growing number of individuals within the general populace of Pakistan view the Aurat March campaign as a futile endeavour. In their perception, the movement fails to address the authentic challenges faced by women in the country, instead concentrating on challenging the conventional family structures entrenched in Pakistani society. The feminist narrative in Pakistan attracts substantial criticism from the public due to their belief that it significantly deviates from the principles that should define a genuine feminist movement in Pakistan. A male commenter highlights the disparity between Western feminist ideals and those of Pakistan. He writes, ***'Feminism in Western Countries: 1. We want equal salaries 2. We want social rights 3. We want equal political recognition. Feminism in Pakistan: Log mujhe ghoor ghoor k q dekhte hain (Why do people stare at me?).'*** This comment highlights the contrast between the focus of feminism in Western countries which is centred on significant issues such as social rights and political equity, and the focus of feminism in Pakistan, which he believes is solely concerned with women's freedom on the streets and their desire to be free from unwanted stares. To this commenter, the Aurat March narrative does not serve the purpose of promoting true feminist ideals. This perspective is widely held by the vast majority in Pakistan who view feminism in Pakistan as a lost cause. This frame of mind of the general public is evident in their responses to the narrative propagated by contemporary feminists in Pakistan.

What is significant here to note is that the majority of both men and women representing the general public sentiment in Pakistan share the same view and equally

condemn the feminist arguments being circulated in Pakistan by the Aurat March proponents. They outrightly exhibit their rejection of the feminist narrative, which is primarily driven by dissatisfaction they have with the promoted ideals in the feminist narratives present within the feminist discourse. The main point of contention arises from the belief that the ideals represented and promoted in the Pakistani feminist narrative are alien to the socio-cultural norms and customs in Pakistan, and align more with the ideology of the West. While the movement has also garnered support from many who believe it to be a manifesto of women's rights and an instigator of social change, it still encounters noteworthy opposition from a vast majority who believe it to be a contradiction to inherent societal norms and cultural values of Pakistan. Such a deep-seated contrast in viewpoints highlights the perpetual state of strife between feminists and the general public in Pakistan, thus making the ongoing feminist discourse a continuing subject of debate and disputation.

Perpetual Dispute: Navigating the Controversial Debates

A constant debate takes place in Pakistan between the proponents of feminism and those who oppose it over the Aurat March movement. This argument is marked by opposing views, each of which wants to tell a story and build a narrative consistent with their specific ideological orientations. Each has a narrative that is directly in contrast with the other. The argument centres on perpetual conflicts of beliefs held both by the feminists and the general public. Feminist discourses as such attempt to challenge traditional norms and advocate for change in the position and treatment of women in Pakistan while public opinion overwhelmingly rejects the post-modern feminist view of women and how they should behave. Remarkably, this movement's famous slogan, '***'Mera jism, meri marzi'*** translated into English as, '***My body, my choice'***, meets serious resistance and becomes the most controversial aspect of feminism in Pakistan. Although the slogan emphasizes a woman's autonomy over her own body and appears quite straightforward and rational, it clashes with deeply rooted socio-cultural or religious attitudes of the Pakistani community. Thus, the debates around feminist principles persist with far-reaching implications.

A significant point of dispute arises when the general public accuses the feminist campaign of solely targeting men and not taking any practical measures for the betterment of women. This accusation is based on the perception that the feminist discourse propagated by Aurat March consistently questions the concept of patriarchy and often attributes the challenges of women solely to the actions and attitudes of men. From the public's perspective, this approach of targeting men appears unjust and unnecessary, leading to skepticism and opposition towards the movement. To the critics of the Aurat March movement and its emerging narrative, the movement is considered pointless and misleading as according to them the sole purpose of the movement is to hold men accountable for all the wrongs women face in society. This perspective further argues that this focus on blaming men only contributes to an

antagonistic atmosphere wherein segments of the public, particularly men who perceive themselves as being unfairly criticized, react with a sense of resistance and defensiveness. One male commenter shares his views, saying, ***'I think it's a women's appreciation day, not a bashing on men's day. Grow up from this sick mentality.'*** Similarly, another comment by a male member read, ***'It's funny how it's #InternationalWomensDay, but you're still trying to make it about men.'*** These comments show that the majority of people from the public take offense under the impression that the movement is involved in a blame game focused on men and is specifically targeting the patriarchal structures that have historically shaped the behavioural norms and expectations for both men and women.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study on the discourse surrounding feminism in Pakistan, though insightful, has certain limitations. In the present research, the data capturing public narratives may not fully reflect the broad spectrum of opinions and experiences. Additionally, the findings are based on a specific point in time, limiting their application as attitudes and narratives evolve. Since the focus is solely on Pakistan, the conclusions may not apply to other cultural contexts, and factors such as class, ethnicity, and regional differences were not deeply explored in this analysis. To address these gaps, future research should include more diverse voices through interviews and longitudinal studies that track changes in public attitudes over time. Expanding the scope to consider intersectional factors would also provide a more comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, encouraging dialogue between feminists and broader society, promoting public education about feminist issues, and developing policies that respect both cultural values and gender equality are essential steps forward.

Conclusions: Opposing Narratives and Voices of Resistance

The discourse surrounding feminism in Pakistan is rife with complexities, as the discussion appears to be unceasing. Both factions remain unwavering in promoting their viewpoints, constructing narratives that align closely with their respective core ideologies. The central concern revolves around the notions of persuasion and impact, an enduring clash of ideologies. While the feminist narrative endeavours to challenge traditional cognitive and behavioral belief structures, the general populace in Pakistan takes offense at the discursive approaches employed in the feminist discourse, firmly disapproving of the feminist perspective on the conduct of women in the country.

The public's perception of the modern feminist narrative in Pakistan exhibits reservations in identifying heroes, and interestingly, similar responses emerge from both genders as representatives of the general populace. Interestingly, many women also share concerns about the feminist narrative created by the modern feminist discourse in Pakistan, perceiving it to conflict with their socio-cultural and religious

values. Despite being a feminist movement, the Aurat March has not garnered unanimous support from the majority of women in Pakistan. The modern woman is perceived as audacious and unapologetic by the public who appears to them as someone trying to liberate herself from the shackles of socio-cultural constraints. This idea of the liberated modern woman inculcates a sense of fear of tearing down the entire socio-cultural setup in Pakistan which is deeply rooted in religious foundations. As a result, the public responds with skepticism, sarcasm, and outright rejection of the narrative presented by the contemporary feminist discourse.

The continued controversy between the proponents and critics of the feminist narrative reflects the complexity involved in confronting gender-related challenges and societal norms. These opposing views lead to a persistent conflict within the public discourses surrounding feminism in Pakistan. Amidst this ongoing debate, finding common ground and fostering constructive dialogue between feminists and the public remains challenging. The continuous exchange of viewpoints illustrates the multifaceted nature of the ways gender-related issues are addressed. Constructive dialogue and the consideration of diverse stakeholder perspectives are imperative to foster meaningful societal change. An inclusive and equitable society can only be achieved when all voices are heard, and efforts are made to bridge the gaps between contrasting ideologies. Fostering an environment of open discourse and empathy is pivotal in advancing toward a more inclusive and equitable society. This research contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and social justice, advocating for a comprehensive approach to effect meaningful change in the pursuit of a fairer world.

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