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VIEWPOINT

The Poetics of Pakistani Patriarchy: A Critical Analysis of the Protest-signs in Women's March Pakistan 2019

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Abstract: The Pakistani variant of Women's March *Aurat March* celebrated its second year in March 2019. The current study focuses on the issues raised by the participants during *Aurat March* 2019 to define patriarchy from a Pakistani-out-on-the-street feminist struggle. It analyses the protest signs, slogans, messages, and concerns raised through banners in the march. The paper attempts to offer a unique perspective on Pakistani patriarchy by analyzing the voice of the women instead of any theorization or enactment of the voice. It employs visual and textual methods to understand the view of the participants and finds that the participants of the *Aurat March* take patriarchy to be an institution that confines them to traditional gendered roles of homemakers, objectifies them, polices their minds as well as bodies and curtails both their movement and civil rights. The study also found elements of resistance to the patriarchal domination for instance through re-appropriation and redefining gender roles. The study stands to be a significant contribution to the discussion on women's issues and women's voices and help understand the nature of Pakistani patriarchy and the type of resistance against it.

Keywords: patriarchy, feminism, Women's March, gendered roles, mobility

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Women's March has been around for decades but it has been only a recent—and explosive due to the controversy it sparked—phenomenon in Pakistan through its incarnation as *Aurat March* (*aurat* is the Urdu word for woman). In a traditionally suppressive society, the very act of women marching for some demands was tenuous but the protest signs particularly “attracted animosity” (Chughtai 2020) from the religious right for their allegedly obscene nature. The fundamentalists approached the court of law to attempt to secure a restraining order against the march for its “shameful and un-Islamic” (Hayat and Akbar 2020) and the march in Islamabad was even attacked by students of a religious seminary. The march nevertheless went ahead and the protest signs became a topic for debate. Bina Shah (2019) summarizes that the protest-signs “may appear crude to some but many were witty, funny, clever, sarcastic, and some were very touching and straightforward.” In the 2020 *Aurat March*, the protest-signs were such a big issue that the regulatory body for television channels advised broadcasters to filter content that may offend prudish sensibilities.

We feel that the intersection of the protest signs used in the march offers a tantalizing mix of discussing the unmediated voice of the Pakistani women, major issues in Pakistani feminism, and the battles it is fighting against patriarchy. We aim to discuss the protest signs in the 2019 and 2020 iterations of the Women's March in Pakistan to discuss how Pakistani feminism views patriarchy. We feel it would be appropriate to start this paper with developing an understanding of the concept of women's march before delving deep in to the ideological message and implications of the voices raised in the Women's March, March 2019 in Pakistan.

At the turn of the 20th century, the streets of New York City were flooded with thousands of women textile workers demanding better working conditions and equal rights. A year later in 1909, a National Women's Day was celebrated in the country to commemorate the march. Clara Zetkin was the central figure behind celebrating women's day on an international scale. At an International Conference of Working Women in 1910, Zetkin's suggestion was unanimously hailed by the representatives of seventeen countries. The inaugural International Women's Day was celebrated in 1911 in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Denmark. Events in Russia that saw the first Women's march in Russia in 1913 gave impetus to the movement for equal rights and led to suffrage in 1917 associated the march with the countries of the Soviet block and impeded internationalization of the day (Haynes 2019). It took around fifty years for feminists collectively to recognize the day and the United Nations another eight years to officially designate March 8 as the International Women's Day. Throughout the world, rallies, conferences, and marches are organized to highlight the inequality faced by women in all spheres of life. In recent times the march, its goals and the suppression that the march is standing up to came to the limelight when Donald Trump was sworn in as the forty fifth President of the United States of America in 2017. Fearing that Trump's Presidency would materialize his "policy prescriptions and vulgar rhetoric" (Webber, Dejmancee, and Rhode 2018, 12) made during his electioneering a threat to the cause of women's rights, a march was organized in Washington D.C which gathered momentum and became a global protest as women of many countries including Japan, Nairobi, England, New Zealand, and India took part in the demonstrations. With an estimated 4.6 million participants, the march aimed to stress "that Women's rights are human rights" (Rafferty 2017).

The women of Pakistan have not been silent observers of the advances being made on the world stage to combat patriarchy. Be it the advocacy of Muslim Personal Law of Sharia 1948 or the protests against Hudood Ordinance 1979, women of Pakistan have been active in the pursuit of equal rights since the independence of Pakistan. The country witnessed its first *Aurat March* in the year 2018, which was endorsed by hordes of women marching to stage a protest against subjugation, highlighting the grave injustices faced by women at the hands of men and demanded equal footing in the society. The inaugural instalment of the march was limited to metropolitan cities, such as Lahore and Karachi, whereas the march in 2019 saw mobilized women in Quetta, Mardan, Hyderabad, Peshawar, and Gilgit-Baltistan, and each city saw the local women pointing out the patriarchal system and critiqued social norms that oppress women.

The critics of the march mentioned that the march "undermined the cultural values of the society" and were outraged that it "chanted slogans that were derogatory towards men" ("*Aurat March* Placards Attract Criticism" 2019). The march also drew criticism from literary circles as Kishwar Zehra advised the women to locate their freedom in the law, not in "bodies and tongues" and remarked "[w]e want independence but such things will distract us in the same way as jihadist went intractable having the believe that with the killing of 70,000 people they will fly off to heaven" (Usmani 2019). A unanimous resolution was passed in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly condemning the *Aurat March* for being "shameful and un-Islamic" in demands and "immodest" in demeanor. The resolution claimed that the

slogans and placards were “obscene” which targeted family system and social customs (Hayat and Akbar 2019). Celebrities like Shaan and Veena Malik too condemned the protest-signs for being vulgar and contrary to the local cultural values.

For centuries, strict gender roles have defined the position of men and women in society. The division of labor tagged women as homemakers whereas men were associated with the arduous task of providing goods. Man, being the hunter, the bread earner enjoyed a higher status than a woman tending domestic tasks. The advent of agricultural system cemented the idea of the dominance of men over women. Gerda Lerner (1986) traces the roots of the patriarchal system and notes that women have been allocated a subordinate position for long. The idea was generated and strengthened by the religious doctrines, scientific texts, historical documents, and philosophical works which presented the subordination as “universal, God-given, or natural” and for this reason it needed not to be questioned and patriarchal system, since accepted as natural, was “immutable” owing to which it was not challenged (16).

Patriarchal systems operate by oppressing one gender to establish the superiority of the other. While men continue to dominate social, economic, and political fronts, female voices have protested against a system that undermines them. Cynthia Enloe (2017) asserts “Patriarchy is not “invincible” and is “human-made, therefore it is vulnerable to challenge” (160). Enloe claims that the argument for male superiority is brittle and states that patriarchy can be tackled through an organized effort that is inclusive of cross-racial opinions and is mindful of inter-generational struggles. Patriarchy is not limited to one country; thus, the resistance has to be a transnational one rather than exclusive to one country or race.

The tussle between patriarchal system and feminists has gained momentum in recent years. Subsiding prismatic regalia, Hollywood actresses opted for black somber clothes to walk Golden Globes’ red carpet. Charlotte Higgins (2018) observes the color choice that aimed to highlight the accusations against Harvey Weinstein brought patriarchy into the spotlight with “apocalyptic relish.” She claims that the sartorial protest breathed life into a discussion of patriarchy, a term that was “derided and abandoned” for the past decade. On one hand, the protest against patriarchy has taken a center stage in popular culture but on the other hand, there are strong voices that negate the existence of patriarchy. The opponents base their arguments on gender equality, citing incidents of oppression “individual” or “isolated.” Some claim that the “monolithic” term oversimplifies the complex reality of the issue while others enthusiastically cling to the idea of the superiority of men over women finding solace in the gender difference.

The resurgence of the term has been an eye-opener for many women as it jostles the comfort or security offered by the tall tales of the proponents of gender equality. Patriarchy remains ubiquitous and operative either undercover or in full view. The oppression of women has been a norm of the world for centuries and the patriarchal system gains its power from its ability to camouflage itself as a natural mode of life. Higgins (2018) further states that patriarchy is one of those concepts that works like “a pair of spectacles that allow otherwise invisible or inexplicable things to be seen with sudden sharpness” and for this reason exposes elusive power relations that are not confined to one aspect of life but are widespread and multilayered. The study derives part of its rationale from the fact that it would base its view of patriarchy on voices emanating from the society and not on some theory. The bulk of research on sexism, patriarchy, and feminism in Pakistan bases itself on theories propounded in the Western context and applies it on literary texts in the Pakistani or the South Asian context. But this fails to take into account the peculiarities of the local culture and society.

Purpose Statement

The march has been a significant step in the Women's rights movement in Pakistan—the strong reaction to it only shows how it has rung the alarm bells for the conservative. The present study intends to use the slogans used in the march to construct an image of patriarchy for the marching women and identify what the participants hold to be the patriarchal roadblocks to their emancipation. The purpose of the present study may be stated more succinctly as: The purpose of the study is to forge a perception of patriarchy in Pakistan through the slogans, themes, and messages the Women's march participants carried.

Rationale

The study derives its *raison d'être* chiefly from an aversion to the way theory is used in the Pakistani scholarly tradition. It won't be too dramatic to say that the scholarship is hostage to applying Western constructs in the Pakistani context to arrive at findings that merely prove or sometimes disprove the theoretical assertions. Research so often descends to choosing and describing a theory and implementing it on a chosen text to arrive at findings that were always probable and possibly known. The point is that all too often Pakistani research is disconnected with the reality and blind to the particular social reality around it. The present study aims to look at the discourse to arrive at a conceptualization of patriarchy for the Pakistani females and to use this to locate the struggle within the local and global feminist contexts.

The increased space personalized politics have come to occupy in the world (Bennet 2012) and their link with technology and social media (Loader and Mercea 2011; Tufekci 2017) also make a strong case for studying *Aurat March* and the politics of patriarchy it reveals. Events as phenomenal as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Yellow Vests movement, are illustrations of the "rise of personalized forms of political participation" (Bennett 2012, 37). It is for this personalized politics that we feel it appropriate to study the message of the Pakistani edition of Women's march, irrespective of whether or not it proves to be a movement of consequence.

The fact that the US led *womensmarch.com*, the march's official digital home, does not even acknowledge that a sister march was held in Pakistan is also a reason that eggs the present study on. Too long has feminism been the confine of the geographical west, and it is about time that local perspectives be brought within the folds of the discourse. Even within the Pakistani context, the march has hitherto remained the reserve of a few metropolitan cities and their elites. The fact that the organization mobilizing the people for the march does not even have significant web presence shows how important it is to talk about this issue especially as the debate about it being a "good thing by feminists [or] a cause for alarm by anti-feminist forces" (Raza 2019) is raging.

Materials and Method

Our study aims to understand the patriarchal system prevalent in Pakistani society. In addition to discussing patriarchy as the main component of the social fabric, it also aims to define patriarchy in the light of the slogans chanted by the participants of *Aurat March* in its 2019 and 2020 iterations. The weaknesses of Pakistani scholarship and research are such that even Shehribano Afiya Zia (2018) relies on newspaper resources to comment on Pakistani feminism. Even the organizations that made the march possible did not collect the data on the participants, their placard, slogans, or speeches. *The News*

estimated around 2,000 participants in the Islamabad chapter of the march while The Tribune Express put the Lahore march at 3,000. In the Pakistani context, the number is significant. Most of these were urban educated young professional women and students while some were brought from the suburbs under the banners of various NGOs. In view of this the study relied on the internet for images of the protest signs. This study relies on protest signs placards to formulate its argument and for this reason it incorporates both visual and textual method of analysis of around eighty distinct protest signs from the *Aurat March*. The visual method will facilitate in interpreting the images adorning placards, and textual analysis will help discern the viewpoint of the participants.

Analysis

This section discusses the “protest sings” at the *Aurat March* with a view to establishing the grounds from which a theory of what patriarchy entails in contemporary Pakistani feminist thought may be derived. One of the key themes the participants of the *Aurat March* rally around is the patriarchal attempt to police the women’s bodies. Women want the freedom to move about without being subjected to staring and cat-calls. In Pakistan, whether it is in the big cities or villages, the movement and mobility of women outside homes is seen as a privilege awarded by the patriarchs. The restrictions serve as a significant impediment to women’s empowerment and entrench patriarchal hold over women further.

A number of slogans call out men for leering at women in public spaces. This is important in the Pakistani social context where men leering at women is a normal occurrence; as Ahmad Zamani (2016) notes, a homecoming after a brief visit to Turkey was made painful by men leering at her. Placards ask men to not stare using sometimes the informal expression for ogle. It was interesting to note some girls with veils covering their faces holding a placard that shamed men staring at a female with her face covered. This points to a strategy used by women—and more often than not ordained by the men (Rashid 2017)—to avoid being stared at. Religious clerics have presented adopting hijab as the solution to deviant sexual norms and as a means of promoting morality and modesty. Fataneh Farahani (2002) notes that hijab is even touted as a step towards liberation, though wrongly so. Governments, such as those in Iran and Saudi Arabia, promote the hijab as part of the national culture and impose punishments for not observing it. In addition, Iran ran public campaigns “Veil is Security” through billboards showing how a candy whose wrap had been taken off attracted flies, but one that was covered in the wrapper did not. Josh Shahryar (2012), and *The Tehran Bureau* (2015) lay the myth to rest that covering the body will in any way assure safety or protection from gawking eyes. Seen in this context, the placard makes sense and becomes the voice of the hijab-wearing female for whom the hijab has not brought any protection.

In a recent development that reeked of the patriarchal mindset and that helps understand what the marchers are up against is the official notification in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan that requires teenage female school students to cover up with all engulfing *abayas* (gowns). This in conjunction with the distribution of burqas among female students shows that mentality that seeks to cover women up either with a delusion of promoting modesty or the cunning of circumventing female participation as Faisal Bari (2019) notes that initiatives that force women to cover up are not just to police the bodies but to “police [the] minds.” Roshaneh Zafar (2019) sees this as a “simplistic, all-encompassing answer dictated by the “patriarchal norms” to the society’s discomfort with women in the public space. The District Education Officer Haripur issued a notification making *abaya* mandatory for school girls as a corrective measure against eve-teasing and harassment. The notice directed the students to conceal their bodies in order to “avoid any untoward incident” (Hayat 2019). Moreover, burqas were distributed

among the female students in Cheena village of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to safeguard them from “unethical” practices (Sirajuddin 2019). The government officials maintained that the decision was in line with religious teaching and cultural values. This is a far cry from Zia’s (2018) assertion that the women’s resistance in the 1980s has “preserved freedom of expression, and mobility and directly prevented any state prescribed dress code for women” (129).

The reaction to some of the demands shows that while the society is tolerant of some demands, it reacts strongly and adversely when women ask for what is deemed excessive allowance. A banner in the march addresses men and asks them to heat their own meals. The reference is to the practice where men ask women in the house to heat their food for them. This is a traditionally strong element where the working men were treated to hot food when they got home. The practice continued even when microwave ovens became readily and cheaply available. This slogan addresses the concept that providing warm and freshly cooked food to the husbands is women’s primary responsibility no matter if they are working women or housewives. A related slogan asked men to find their own missing sock. The theme that women consider typical, patriarchy supported gender roles to be oppressive is captured in the cheeky slogan that asks for the rule of *paratha* rolls (sort of quesadillas) instead of gender roles like reducing women’s sphere to household chores. In a similar vein, another banner asks men to join the women in the kitchen to cook meals. These slogans show how the division of the minor household chores reflects the society’s preferences for men and women. Since our study is aimed at arriving at the current definition and practices of patriarchy, it is interesting to note that these slogans raise the issues that are considered trivial and the domain of women in the household. These slogans at *Aurat March* are not the first attempt by those who are conscious of women’s right and want to bring to the attention of the people the inequality and biases that exist in women’s treatment and status. Nowadays the advertisements on Pakistani television channels, especially such ads that are related to cooking and household chores, also show a bent towards gender equality showing men cooking or helping their wives in the kitchen, giving voice to the idea of bringing about equality in the work inside home and making life more comfortable and happy by acknowledging and helping women (Afshan 2018). The message in the advertisements does not seem harsh or offensive to the audience, but the messages on the slogans at the march are termed offensive and supporters are bashed for expressing such sentiments. The march stands more as a political movement and unlike ads does not carry the element of entertainment hence the backlash. To the reader of a more gender aware society asking for more equitable gender roles may seem trivial, but in the Pakistani scenario where the patriarchs brand feminism as “unnecessary” and of “no importance in the Islamic structure” of the society (Ovais 2014) even this is a big step and may bring around a significant change. It may also be kept in mind that so often the Pakistani patriarchy’s perception is that the women want to undermine the men and establish their supremacy over men (Mahmood 2018). The discussion often becomes aligned along binary gender lines: men supporting the patriarchal view and women supporting feminism. The extreme views alienate both these genders and turn issues into battles that have to be won. Mahmood feels that there needs to be an ever-present realization the “feminism is not designed to undermine men” and there is “a dire need to discover a mutual ground for both genders, rather than playing a tug-of-war from a distance.”

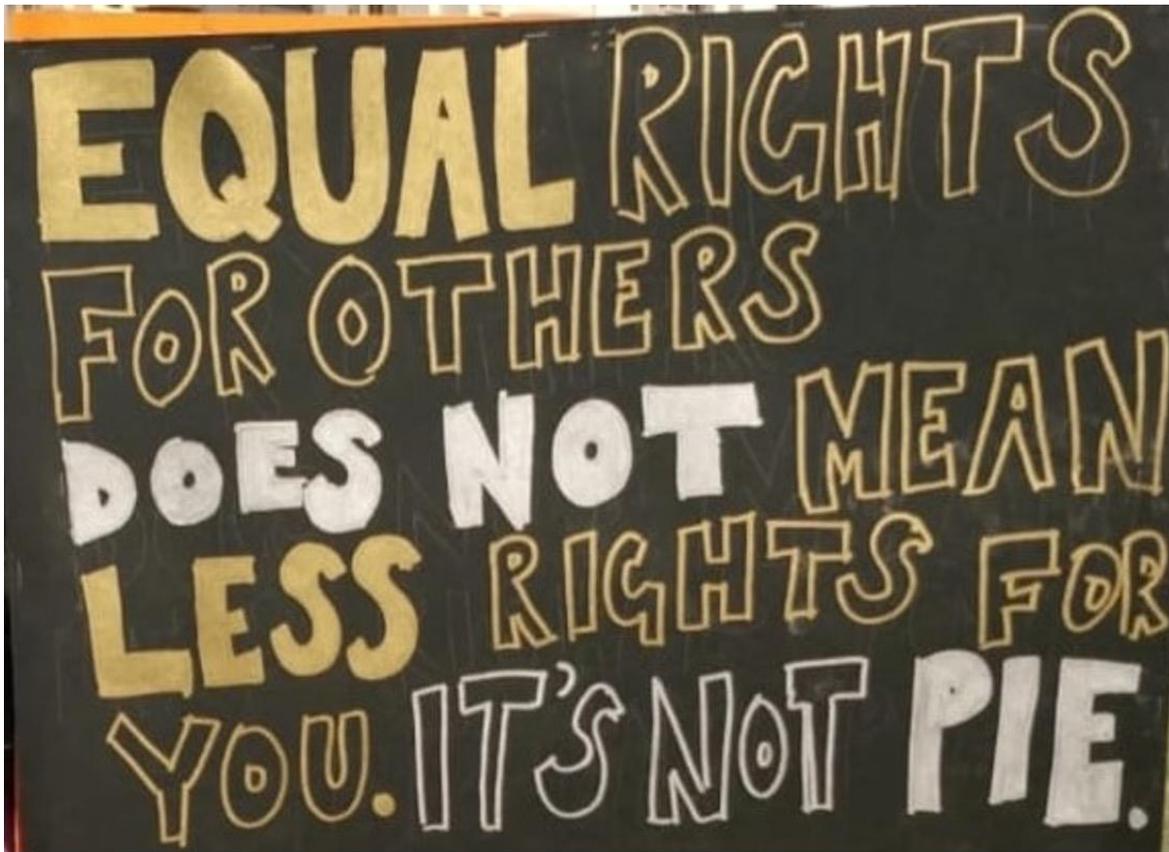


Figure 1: Staff, Images. “Equal Rights For Others Does Not Mean Less Rights For You. It’s Not Pie.”
Digital image. Dawn.com. March 9, 2019. <https://images.dawn.com/news/1182008>.

One of the issues the participants of the march attempted to highlight was easy mobility for women. Invoking the local cultural saying *baap ki sarak* (it’s my birthright), they say that the road is not someone’s personal property and hence a prohibited area for the others. The roads are for girls too. “Our Roads” reads another poster to stake women’s claim on the right to be out. There were some campaigners who had brought bicycles and motorcycles to the march and they specifically targeted restrictions on women’s mobility as marks of their subjugation. An evocative slogan reads “Pedal to Fight Patriarchy” as the girl carrying the message stands next to a bicycle. A clever turn of the phrase “Two-Tyred of Patriarchy” adds humor to the campaign for women’s right to go out on their own.

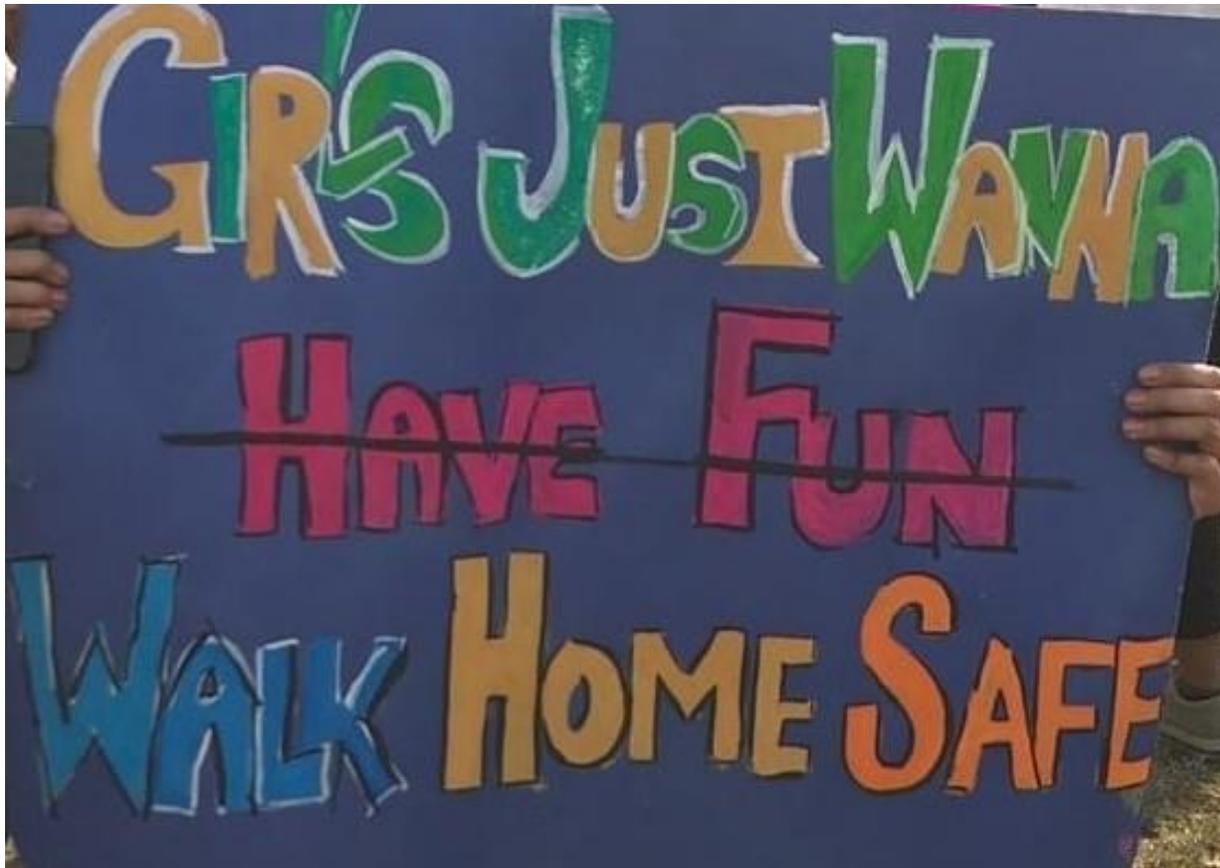


Figure 2: Staff, Images. “Girls Just Wanna Walk Home Safe.” Digital image. Dawn.com. March 9, 2019. <https://images.dawn.com/news/1182008>.

The anti-march critics denounced the *Aurat March* for misplaced priorities and ignoring the “real issues” (Azeem 2019). Critics said that independent mobility was the desire of the privileged few and did not affect the average woman. In the same vein, they stressed that the women marchers should focus the “major politico-legal problems” of the country including education, healthcare, and social security and work to get them addressed for all the citizens of the country instead of just the women (Faraz 2019). The study feels that the women marchers are coming from the stance that “the fact that those ‘bigger’ problems exist, does not take away a woman’s right to complain about smaller, but definitely nettlesome, issues like men refusing to help with domestic work or policing Women’s wardrobes.” The study feels that in the Pakistani context, which does not see anything wrong in a sixteen-year-old boy driving an older going sister, it is easy to make an emotive argument that mobility is not a concern. The women marchers are making a point because they are tired of things that affect them being overlooked as unimportant or at times luxuries that a conservative society cannot grant them.

One of the placards in the march featured the iconic Rosie the Riveter. This serves a two-fold function: establishing that the Pakistani variant of the march is part of the common global struggle for women empowerment, and food for thought regarding the extent Pakistani feminists are dependent on Western images of the empowered woman and how it draws on the Western tradition to fuel itself intellectually. Rosie the Riveter was employed as a propaganda tactic to rope in women in the wartime industry (Pruitt 2018). However, Rosie was “reframed” by feminists to serve as the icon of the US

mainstream feminist movement (Sharp and Wade 2011) and it became— Leila Rupp (2014) feels misleadingly—linked to women’s empowerment and over the years was constructed variously to suit the ideological needs of the discourse creators (Honey 1984). Rosie the Riveter is a US construct brought in to mean something for those with mainstream Western feminist exposure to understand the message. The most important meaning that can be associated with the image here is that it speaks of the Westernized orientation of the participant, if not the march.

Importantly, the march confronts the patriarchal view that women are the incarnation of the family’s honor. Rafia Zakaria (2016) notes that for a large section of the Pakistani society “maintaining honor” means “controlling women” even if it means murdering them to quell the exercise of free will. Honor killing—manslaughter labelled as killing to protect the honor of the family—has been a major issue in Pakistan which sees scores of women killed every year. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan estimates 1,246 honor killings to have been perpetrated over a two-year period from 2014 to 2016. The participants of the march attempt to bring out the misdirected idea of associating honor only with women and thereby using it as a means of subjugating women.



Figure 3: A, Fatima. “I Pledge To Stop Honor Killings.” mangobaaz.com. Digital image. March 10, 2019. <https://www.mangobaaz.com/41-of-the-most-powerful-posters-from-aurat-march-that-you-absolutely-have-to-see>.

One of the most important aspects of the march that this study came across in its analysis is linked with patriarchy only tangentially but fascinatingly. The Pakistani orthodoxy has long viewed

concepts like feminism and its criticism of patriarchy as Western constructs. The study cannot but opine that the march offers a fertile ground for debates centering on the issue of how far the ideas and their expression can be linked with the general Pakistani society. The march with its educated, urban, upper middle-class participants who through their choice of dress and often English language and their witticism that at times borders the risqué does ostensibly seem westernized and the representative of only a particular class of the society. Feminism has not been a welcome feature in Pakistan partly because of it being perceived as a western construct and thereby a far cry from the Pakistani values and partly because it challenges the set gender roles. In such a context, it is easy to spread a perception that feminism promotes “nudity, vulgarity, and anti-Islamic norms” (Azeem 2019). Ovais (2014) sees this as not exclusive to the conservative right in Pakistan. She asserts that while “understanding and tolerance for feminism” in the Muslim world “remain low,” this is paralleled by the European perception of the veil as utterly oppressive. Easy to be labelled salacious slogans and signs, such as “What Makes a Man a Stud Makes a Woman a Slut,” were picked up by the conservative right to show that they were right all along about the marchers working under a Western construct. Faraz Talat (2019) sees a method in this in-your-face brand of feminist struggle performed by the marchers. He feels that the *Aurat March* is “the kind of feminism that doesn’t perform politely on the sidelines; it holds the nation upside-down and shakes it until rights and liberties start to rain from its pockets.” We feel that it would require more than textual analysis to determine the intricate relationship between the march and the Pakistani society. The transdisciplinarity of postmodernism comes in handy here to explore the issues that make up the society’s view of feminism, resistance to it, and the evolving tussle between the two.

The “madness” of enraging the patriarchs through in-your-face slogans and hints of sexual liberty is accompanied by a rational approach towards mitigating the construct that the women’s struggle in Pakistan is a funded project aimed at undermining the country’s religious roots. The marchers have not embraced Urdu the local language to give the march and the broader movement a local, Pakistani identity. Zuneera Shah (2019) identifies the lack of the local language Urdu in discussing the issues women are facing in Pakistan as a factor harming the women’s cause. Feminist movements are viewed with repulsion among the majority of the populace in countries like Pakistan because feminism is perceived as a foreign concept. The association of English, often seen as a legacy of the colonial English rulers (Jabeen 2019), and the women’s struggle for rights adds to this perception. “*Aurat March*” with its blended title, and Urdu protest signs are “a step in the right direction” as they lend a “local flavour to the ways we can talk about feminism and gender.” Adopting the vernacular also helped the *Aurat March* bring misogynistic cat-calls, maxims, etc. to the limelight and show them for what they are beside rebutting the false claims that the Pakistani women’s struggle is little more than a foreign funded attack on the Pakistani culture.

The use of Urdu vernacular has also had another positive impact in that the *Aurat March* has made feminism an issue that was always “political” and “personal” (Mohyidin 2019). The words come from the heart to talk about issues that are close to the heart. Women break the taboo of words and label themselves *badmash* (gangsters), talk about sexual intercourse and sexual organs in relative crude terms where the “verbally aggressive” (Schippers 2013) linguistic signs become “symbols of power and solidarity” (Krishnayya and Bayard 2001). The march has given the agency to make the manifesto of the women to individuals and involved them in the struggle against the patriarchal mindset. Rimmel Mohyidin (2019) notes that the march set alarm bells ringing in the conservative circles of male dominance with a sitting member of the Parliament invoking as high an official as the Prime Minister to “investigate” the actual motives of the march. Mohyidin regards this as a sign of the success of the march.

The march takes up the issue of silencing the women’s voices when it dares speak up against suppression. Rebecca Solnit (2017) asserts that being unable to tell [one’s] story is a living death,” a theme

discussed in detail by Marnia Lazreg (2014), Enrique Gracia (2000), and Louise F Fitzgerald and Alayne J Ormerod (1993) in various contexts such as domestic violence, and sexual harassment, and the participants of the march have a similar view on the issue. They particularly connect it with rape victims and their silencing. There is also a view that silence emboldens the perpetrators of violence and oppression and leads to further acts of greater and more systemic violence. With rape a daily occurrence and its punishment a rarity, Pakistani feminism feels that stifling the voice of the victims is a major way of inhibiting women's empowerment.



Figure 4: A, Fatima. "I March For Rape Victims And Their Unheard Sotories." mangobaaz.com. Digital image. March 10, 2019. <https://www.mangobaaz.com/41-of-the-most-powerful-posters-from-aurat-march-that-you-absolutely-have-to-see>.

Some part of the discourse witnessed in the women's march Pakistan re-appropriates the negative identity assigned to women who dare to break stereotypes. This re-appropriation is similar to the one that saw female hip hop artists own the word bitch with Lil Kim describing herself and fellow singer Missy Elliot describing themselves as "real motherfucking bitches" back in 1999, supercharging a trend that continues to date with contemporary singers like Iggy Azalea rapping *New Bitch* (2014) and Cardi B flaunting "I'm the boss bitch." In a society which stresses manning up and being a man in the face of anything adverse, the marchers call for being a woman. "Be a woman" shouts a protest-sign as another

proudly asserts “we are gamblers...” Another female holds a sign showing a gesture of flipping the finger. A sign shows a woman sitting with legs spread wide apart with a slogan “Here You Go, I’m Sitting Properly.” They are taking up the patriarchal idea that modesty for women extends to every part of their life. The woman’s dress should be modest and so should be her language and so also her gait and the way she sits. The protestor’s idea is to be the immodest girl the patriarchs want her to not be. One protest-sign showing ovaries urged the women to “Grow A Pair.” While the wit of the sign is obvious, the deeper message is slightly disturbing in that it asks women to be like men which would be like a negation of their femininity.

Aurat March has attracted a lot of attention and has initiated a debate. The march witnessed an increased number of participants in 2019 than the previous year but as the numbers increased so did the criticism. It has been viewed as an act of rebellion, however “the rebellion was seen as a good thing by feminist and a cause for alarm by anti-feminist forces” (Raza 2019). Sabeer Lodhi (2019) feels that “inappropriate placards” could have been avoided as they have “polarized [the debate] further.” He asserts that there is a need to bridge the gap between the opposing views by taking a more inclusive route: “It is unnecessary to create the “shocker effect” by using controversial, albeit sassy and courageous, placards since ensuring and the fight for equality is not a revolution but a process.” But such views based on a generalized view of the signs read more like apologies for patriarchal oppression and do not look into the message being shared. As Tuba Umair Shamsi (2019) argues that pointing fingers seems to have taken center stage whereas “the actual fight for the rights of women deprived seems to have been forgotten. Suddenly, all this seems to be reduced to a cat-fight, where each party is just looking for an excuse to put the other down.” But she herself allows the fight to distract her as she starts pacifying the angered right instead of asking everyone to look past the form they do not like to the real content.

We feel that the critics and commentators have allowed themselves to be overly occupied by the perception of the march by the patriarchal powers and have therefore been discussing the resistance to the march or defending the march. Tuba Shamsi (2019) opines that the real purpose of march has been marred by the proponents and the opponents of march. The debate between the two sides has garnered more attention than the equal rights movement for women, which should have been in the discussion but seems a lost cause. Tehreem Azam (2019) and Remshay Ahmed (2019) take up the issue of the criticism of the march but do not go into specifics. Azam reports that the organizers were threatened on the social media with rape but she does not offer a detailed commentary on the travesty. Similarly, she hedges the threat of rape, a cleric made against women. Ahmed mentions the march has unveiled the hypocrisy of men and underscores the oppression women have suffered over the years. She further argues that the participants are waging a battle against the misogynist mindset that cannot accept assertive women. Another issue is the critics’ myopia where they see the privileged class as representing the society. Zia (2018) sees the fact that “many women head the performing and fine arts institutions both in government and in the private sector,” that there is a female singing duo on TV and also a nation women’s cricket team, as the victory of the female resistance movement on the 1980s. If some women being in positions of power had been of any significance, Pakistan having a female Prime Minister in 1988 and then 1993 would have been a gender-wise equitable country. This study gives primacy to the voice of the *Aurat March* because it is women’s voices that matter and not that of the critics. Whether critics paint a rosy picture or do a turn-around to suggest that “hope for equal rights or even reform is near impossible” (Zia 2018), they remain far from the battlefield where actual women are challenging patriarchal norms. Thus, our study deals with the march as the voice of the women different from the mediated voice of critics and discusses the issues the women in the march bring forth. It is in the listening to the marchers, not just

looking at the tussle between the patriarchs and the feminists, that we feel lies the significance and uniqueness of the study.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited by the fact that it did not have access to interviewing the participants and had to rely only on pictures. This eliminated the possibility of judging the link between social class and the ideology, personal or group experience, and the direct stories of the women marchers. The pictures show that a number of bicycles used for the participants advocating greater mobility for women were absolutely new. They had most probably been bought for the march as the protective bubble wrap was still on. If the study had been able to interview the participants some information about their lives, lifestyle, and experience, we could have enriched this analysis with more direct insight.

A second limitation we would like to acknowledge is the number of protest signs. We were able to access signs through search engines and websites and there were sixty-eight signs available online. If we were present at the march, our personal access would have yielded access to more signs and thus more data. Having pointed out this, we still believe that the study has searched for the signs exhaustively and we are confident that the data includes significant signs at the march that relay important insight for the operation of patriarchy and the strategies for resisting it.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the protest signs shows that the Pakistani patriarchy is perceived as a confining institution that restricts women to gender roles of homemakers with the chief duty of serving the men. It marks women who show agency as a threat, further justifying ogling, threatening, and violence against them as valid means of taking away their independence. There is a righteousness attached to patriarchal behavior and moral superiority runs through the courses of the phenomenon. Patriarchy turns out to be usurping civil spaces and restricting mobility and freedom of women. By restricting mobility, it is policing and controlling the lives of women. It is interesting to note that the majority of the slogans and writings on the placards address very basic issues, asking men to let women live as humans who deserve equality in domestic and social realms. The demand of the participants of the women's march, for women's mobility, voice, respect, and freedom from male policing reveals that the feminist movement in Pakistan has a long way to go as the very basic rights of women are yet to be attained, let alone the more complex issues such as equal job opportunities, inheritance, and political representation in patriarchal society. Women are breaking silences over, what in the past was considered, sacred and unchangeable words and laws of men, and are dealing with the backlash and severe criticism. This attention is diverted towards criticizing women for being bold and vocal about what in the past was considered as right and unalterable, thus diverting attention from the issues that women face and want to be addressed.

A few brief comments on the impact of *Aurat March* on contemporary and future Pakistani feminism is also in order. The *Aurat March* is intrinsically linked with the internet social networking experience of the Pakistani society, and it is here that the future of the women's movement in Pakistan lies. The internet with its ease of creating collectives for action and not traditional politics. Political parties have failed women, as has been made evident by their response to the recent horrific rape of a woman off a motorway where the political parties only made political points and nobody empathized with the victim.

Though Zia (2020) feels that Pakistan People's Party (PPP) voicing support to the marchers bodes well for the march, the support—however little it actually translates into—may not be much and may even be counterproductive when the party compromises on its stance for a share in a government. Amina Jamal's case (2013) for an Islamist feminism spawning too fails on the same grounds as a political party is by default hungry for power, cost what it may. *Aurat March* (2020) too feels that the political parties have “collectively failed” the cause of feminism. The so-called liberal PPP has a chequered past of supporting the legislation to declare Ahmedis non-Muslim (which effectively turns them into unequal citizens of the state vulnerable to most callous discrimination), failing to repeal the blasphemy laws, or the discriminatory Hudood Ordinance that requires a rape victim to produce four witnesses prove that she was indeed raped. A political party will not think twice before renegeing on its stance, if its power politics so demands. We believe that the *Aurat March* has its energy due to its grounding in the people, the personalized politics of the urban, educated, aware women who are trying to put their voice across without aiming for political mileage of votes or places in the government. We see the *Aurat March* and the collective activism it represents as the soul of Pakistani feminism due to the involvement of digital technology and social networking platforms. To put things in further context, the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) website has little scholarly content on feminism and only serves as a news briefing tool, while the Women's Action Forum (WAF) does not have a dedicated website. Though Nighat Said Khan (1995), arguing for the need of such organizations, feels the women's movement has been “subsumed by ahistorical and apolitical discourses” the fact remains that such organizations and their mode of working has become outdated. APWA and WAF were “essentially political movements” (Saigol 2019), which due to their nature and their link with the struggle for a democratic form of government preferred street demonstrations and found it difficult to adopt the digital platforms. Moreover, the political linkage with parties meant that they remained subservient to the parties and the ideology of the parties. The participation of the women in *Aurat March* announces the death knell of the organization-based struggle. This is why we have referred to personalized politics as the way forward for feminism where the movement is a collective involving the real world women, not armchair theorists and critics hogging the issues. We believe that seeing such organization or institution-based action fail the new generation of Pakistani women has decided to fight their battle online and through collectives organized and energized through online tools where individual voices can be heard and where these individual voices shape feminist thought in Pakistan. Pakistani feminism collectives allowing personalized politics will be the canvasses where individual voices paint the future of women empowerment.

It would also be pertinent to point to a number of key themes that may be explored in future research. A key issue would be to comment on the ideology of Pakistani feminism and see how genuinely it represents the society and the social consciousness. Ideology is perhaps doomed to be a particular groups mantra, but it would still be a good debate to see which class's consciousness is being projected and whose voice the *Aurat March* really is. It may also be interesting to look into the slogans that are highly likely to be considered provocative and objectionable in the generally conservative Pakistani society. Indeed, these protest signs were one reason the women's march came under fire in the press and on the social media. The link between class and language may also be studied in the light of the data the march produced.

Pakistani liberals are often bashed for their Westernized thinking and the women's march was condemned by many (Jan and Abbasi 2019) as propaganda by the Westernized Pakistani elite. While the present study maintains that the *Aurat March* is a local voice, it cannot say how representative this voice actually is of the multitudinous potpourri of Pakistani women population. We accept that “the categorization of the problems facing women in Pakistan as “more important” and “less important” is

false” (Khalid 2019), but it does not mean that the women of different sections of the Pakistani society suffer from the issues in the same way. While mobility may be perceived as an issue for some, it may not be an issue or issue enough for another segment of the society. Instead of a hierarchy, the interlinking of the concepts, perceptions, and issues need to be studied. Research can be conducted to examine if the women or people belonging to the rural areas, who are less privileged, share the same ideas about patriarchy or agree with the march’s conceptualization of the key elements that would ensure women’s liberation. It would be a good idea to analyze the march and its iterations in the light of personalized action frames as Kristen Weber, Tisha Dejmanee and Flemming Rhode (2018) argue that the individual voices, given an organizational structure, may well lead to collective action. As the women’s march had active participation of men, it also opens up the opportunity of studying if and how the male view regarding patriarchy is evolving and developing a culture of inclusion. Further, it would be a worthwhile endeavor to determine what pressures the men face for their anti-patriarchy stance.

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