



Social Construction of Feminism through Media: The Discourse and Critique in Pakistan

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Noor Fatima* Muhammad Bilal† Bisma Butt‡

Abstract

Feminism is about studying gender differences and regarding complementing the role of sexes in society. Unfortunately, Pakistan can be counted among the states that show less tolerance towards Feminism and has been regarded as a western concept that accounts for being unnecessary for an Islamic state. Post 9\11 Muslims became the center stage of world politics while Muslim women with false notions were started to be seen as the oppressed and victimized. In portraying the image of women, world media has played an important role. With the changing media discourse, the perceptions regarding women's roles also changed. This research article would highlight the effect of media on the building of power structures of gender in Pakistan.

Key Words: Feminism, Social Construction of Women, Power Structures of Gender

Introduction

The social construction of women has been effective by the ideas and the social relations set by media. Therefore, this research would tend to de-emphasize the role of the state in defining and providing social, economic, political rights and security to women rather would reconceptualize the importance of subjectivity to focus upon the prevailing pessimistic construction of feminism that becomes the hurdle in the way of development. Women's identity with time has been shaped by the media mainly through language attached to the idea. The way media refers to women becomes the behavior of society affecting their individuality. Hence, media can adopt the role of replacing the discourse set for women with an empowering discourse that can emphasize the importance of the participation of women and equalized the gender-biased structure. This would ultimately lead both masculinity and femininity to have gender compatibility rather than the competition. The

*Assistant Professor, Department of Politics and IR, International Islamic University Islamabad, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: noor1403@yahoo.com

† Assistant Registrar Women University, Swabi, KP, Pakistan.

‡ PhD Scholar, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

changing and displacing of the gender unequal discourse must be set to the empowering and harmonious role of both men and women to remove the social, political and economic in justifications from the constructed power structure of the gender.

The state has always been considered as a primary actor to play a role in international politics as well as at home when it bounds with the 'social contract' that is when individuals give up their natural freedoms to obtain political order by the state (Brohi, 2006). Therefore, the role of individuals, their perceptions and thought process matters a lot that collectively shapes the decisions and norms of a particular state. State institutions and their branches share the burden of the state and become the bridge between the state and the individuals. With the concept of the 'Separation of Powers', three main estates as Legislative, Executive and Judiciary were brought in front but recently a fourth estate has also emerged that has the closest ties with the public and has the ability to construct the minds of individuals most effectively than any other source, that is the Media. Media now has adopted different approaches from print, to news and social media that is the most approachable by the masses (Hasan, 2002). Media very carefully selects its audience and hence attracts every segment of society through various agendas. Pakistan has a very vibrant media that has been laying a huge impact on the people and many of the decisions of the state. The raising of issues and showing the legislative the demand of the citizens and their problems can be highly appreciable. Many of the high profile cases have been countered by media that raised a wave of public opinion and enforced the respective institutions to work on it. Media has not adopted the role of solely building perceptions about leadership rather also has been seen as building the image of the role of gender as well. The way media discusses gender becomes the norm of the society, therefore it has started to occupy a space of being a teller of 'right and wrong'. Media news channels through talk shows have many times discussed the role of women and affirmed different ideologies regarding women in Pakistani society. The same has been shown by the entertainment segment that is most liked and seen by the population daily. The roles adopted by the actors in the dramas, films, and fiction constructs the real role of a woman and a man, defining their gender and how their ideal behavior must be that can help them to adapt to the environment of the society (Jalal, 1991).

Femininity and Masculinity

Femininity and Masculinity both are not biological rather a cultural construct. Therefore, the social construction of both genders varies across cultures. Not only the cultures rather with time the perceptions of genders have been changed. Culture demarcates the boundaries for both the genders and does not allow them to come out of the box. With that it gives the gender the proper representation and characteristics with which it has to move in a society. Masculinity has usually been

referred with respect to the strength, competition, aggression while the representation of femininity has been subjected to a discriminatory stereotype. Media that since its existence has played as a catalyst in highlighting and becoming the mirror of the society, therefore can play a unique role in making an egalitarian society that in present day is the top priority of any state. The notion for equality of rights and fundamental liberty has become one of the most desired priorities and norms of any democratic state. Media as the fourth pillar of a state can help in portraying the genders in a strong way to give voice in breaking the stereotypes. for, education, society and most importantly the media. Media images of women through a long time had been criticized by Feminist Media Studies when Betty Freidan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* highlighted and criticized the image of an "Ideal Woman" by calling it as the 'The happy housewife heroine', where women are shown only in the back role, with no empowerment, defining the importance of imaging femininity by media that can ultimately construct the minds of people regarding the gender role. Not only this rather UNESCO's statement on Mass Media in 1979, namely: "Taking into consideration that TV programs give information and reflect on gender roles in real life, it must be stated that women's images are distorted and unrealistic in these programs. All kinds of entertainment programs portray women in a dual image. On one hand, they are decorative objects. Yet, at the same time, they are passive individuals in the household and in marriage who are dependent on men for financial, emotional and physical support" (Mahmood, 2005).

Even in the first world states where media has associated itself with the strong and independent women being equal to men, yet feminine qualities informed with sexuality, play an important role while shaping the concept of femininity. With the fragmental display of women's body attached to beauty, myth can be seen in the world media but when it comes to Pakistan then the role of women in media and projection of femininity through fiction can highly be questionable. Women's role has been passive and under men command while to meet up the globalized world stage media has also started objectifying women through beauty and body language. Therefore, it seems to be important to change the perspective of media, especially when describing the 'ideal woman' with the replacement of the idea of gender equality and gender complementing each other rather than the competition (Shaheed, 2002).

"No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you; we are victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live. You should take your women along with you as comrades in every sphere of life" (Muhammad Ali Jinnah, 1944).

Women in Pakistan have been facing issues from domestic to social arenas. Keeping in consideration to the historical evidence, Pakistani women have usually

been oppressed and bereft of their fundamental rights. It has been the social awareness mainly through the media that women in Pakistan started to realize the importance of their role and for bringing about the positive change in society. Despite, media's role of giving women a chance to show their capabilities, it still has been blamed for objectifying women.

Understand the Effective Role of Media in Describing the Gender Roles

It is important to understand the effective role of media in describing the gender roles, it must be look back since Muslims of the sub-continent started to aspire about an independent land. "It was that time when the role of women in politics got highlighted by the media. Media was used as a tool as women participation became a dire necessity, for increasing Muslim vote bank and for the display of numerical strength at the Muslim League's political rallies" (Shaheed, 2002). By 1790, "the system of law in India was anglicized but Personal Laws of every religion were retained. It continued to govern the relations between men and women hence, the customary and religious laws that subordinated women were left untouched" (Shehrbano, 2005). Not only had this, in fact the British law deprived women of their right to inheritance that was already recognized in religious law. Indians of sub-continent had realized that the struggle movement against the British Raj would not be successful without the active participation of women. Therefore the leadership of independence movements started to highlight the role of women through the media. "Print media was most effective mean to inspire women and also Muslim men who had constructed the role of women solely to home and kitchen. The role of women subjugated by Muslim society as personal can clearly be visualized when studying the adaptation of British education reforms". Sir Syed Ahmed Khan came at front as the pioneer to accept the modern education building Aligarh. It can be observed that modern education was dedicated to the Muslim men while women were left back away from modernism having the home or madrasah education. When referring to print media then poets like Akbar Allahabadi can be seen looking at the political situation of the sub-continent through the gender lens. He particularly wrote a large number of poems against the western education and that how it has been the reason for "the loss of veiling among Muslim women which he saw akin to the loss of masculinity among Muslim men. He viewed the aggressive intervention and influence of the masculine colonial state as an emasculation of the Muslim nation which was unable to protect Muslim women from the gaze and effect of the colonizers" (Sumar, 2002). As soon as the heat of independence movement started to burn, it was realized by the Muslim leaders that gaining a new territory cannot be possible without the effective role of women in politics. Therefore, the role of media seemed to change in favor and women issues were started to be talked about. For making women active in politics, their education got highlighted. Anjuman-e-

Himayat-e-Islam opened a girl elementary school in 1885 and so by 1914 the first Urdu journal "Khatoon" for women got published. The role of women by print media started to get constructed in their favor to gain a political objective that is the inclusion of women in the drive for an independent Muslim state. "Huquq-e-Niswan, a newspaper for the women's rights, was started by Syed Mumtaz Ali and his wife Muhammadi Begum. This newspaper got widely publicized across large parts of India and came to be known as Rahbar- e-Niswan, the guiding light for women" (Zia, 2007). In Lahore, three newspapers emerged called Akhbar- e-Niswan, Sharif Bibi and Tahzeeb-e-Niswan. The names of the newspapers clearly describe the mindset of the population. It was a new phenomenon and trend flowing in the Muslim community of subcontinent about the rights of women. "At the very same time, First wave of Feminism was at its peak in the West and so it can be counted as a trickle-down effect on sub continent. The revolutionary change to the gender power structure that was build up by centuries was challenged by the help of media. Media used a specific discourse to attract audience referring women as *Sharif* (pious) and by changing their role to *Akbar* (great)" (Zia, 2007). Women all across the sub-continent by the changing discourse of media started to value the importance of feminine gender for the progress of the separate political entity for the Muslims. As a result, "in 1915 the first All India Muslim Ladies Conference got held and the same year, a delegation led by Begum Hasrat Mohani met the Secretary of State Montagu, demanding equal rights for women from the British Raj. Women as being the part of half of the population were given the most important political right as in 1918 Muslim League along with Indian National Congress announced support for women franchise" (Rashid, 2000). Women like Jahanara Shahnawaz, Bi Amma, Begum Rana Liaqat Ali Khan came in light for the independence movement protecting the political rights of women. "The Muslim women participation in politics was only left for voting, contesting and holding political offices but were seen as demonstrating and resisting against oppression. Civil Disobedience movement was launched in 1947 and so the role of women got awakened especially from the North Western Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)" (Rashid, 2006). They were mobilized and Pathan women marched unveiled in public for the first time. They were charged for hoisting the Muslim League flag and even got jailed. Women role laid an important chapter in the history of the creation of Pakistan. Hence, it can be realized that how the role of women was changed due to the change in the media discourse to aim for a political movement. As in 1940 Mr. Jinnah said "Women are supposed to create a sense of general political consciousness. They should stand shoulder to shoulder with men in practical politics" (Tauris.2006).

Soon after the independence, there came an end to the struggle movement. With only few print media devices, women again started to have a passive role while giving men the huge chunk of politics. With the name of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the ideology of Islamic strands was constructed in the nation. The

notion was soon realized and challenged by Fatima Jinnah, the sister who fought for freedom with his brother and who always stood for the women's rights. In 1964 she was nominated as the presidential candidate against the Field Marshal Ayub Khan who was at the height of dictatorial power. She not only electrified the nation but also became the woman pioneer in South Asia challenging the masculine power. She had such a powerful role that even Jamt-i-Islami held its support towards her by calling it *albeit* under the shelter of being "*need of the hour*". As the opposition used a political tool for calling women's role in politics, prohibited in Islam. The few women representation in politics still worked phenomenally to speak up for the right of women. Muslim personal law of Shariah got passed that gave rights to women to inherit property, including agricultural land. It has been an irony for women struggling to attain their fundamental rights as Islam had granted them fifteen hundred years ago. It was also the political role of women that they instigated women organization to launch a campaign against Prime Minister Muhammad Ali Bogra's second marriage. It laid the foundation for Muslim Family Law Ordinance that demanded equality of status, opportunity, pay and work for men and women. Media in Pakistan, at the time was limited and women issues were discussed slightly. Therefore, many women organizations became the voice of Pakistani women that helped them to get political rights. Under the 1956's constitution the seats in parliament got reserved for women and made women apparently empowered not unless the 1962's constitution when due the Presidential form of government it got abolished. Under the 1973's election campaign. Knowing the importance of women electorate, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto fascinated women by the promise of providing *Roti, Kapra Aur Makan* for every citizen of Pakistan, making women realize their own dignity. Thus for the time in history of Pakistan it was seen that women were encouraged by the political parties and voted for the candidates of their own choice, irrespective of their male family members' desires. 1973's constitution was drafted with the committee having two lady members, Begum Nasim Jahan and Begum Jahan Ara Shahnawaz. The result clearly showed the importance of women's leadership as the constitution gave gender equality to every citizen of Pakistan. Not only has this but reserved seats and women granted to hold offices in Civil services as well the Foreign Office of Pakistan. Thus, with the start of a democratic government, free media, the political rights to women started to unveil upon the Pakistani women.

Creating and Co-opting Feminist Spaces

The activism of the Jamia Hafsa women students in Islamabad first appeared in the media in January 2007. "These students belonged to a religious school or madrasa that was part of the Lai Masjid/Mosque in a posh neighborhood in the capital, Islamabad. These young women illegally occupied the premises adjoining the Lai Masjid, in protest against the government's threat to demolish it and reclaim it as

state land. The women also allegedly kidnapped a woman from the neighborhood whom they accused of prostitution and only let her free once she repented". (Zia, 2007). "The most civil society members were disturbed by the threat to liberal lifestyles, rather than looking at this occupation as a politics of protest that challenged the state. The Jamia Hafsa women, who wore complete black veils and carried bamboo sticks in their occupation of the mosque library, were mocked by the liberal, English-language media as the veiled brigade or chicks with sticks" (Zia, 2007).

The liberal elite "in Pakistan condemns 'extremist forces' and portrays them as new arrivals from nowhere, or at best as straight out of a madrassa. This tendency tends to elide over and ignore the serious political spaces they have come to occupy. Progressive women's groups, as expected, made more salient statements on this incident, bringing out a historical perspective and linking extremist violence to the past thirty years of state policies". However, "in a press release, a group of clearly identifiable 'progressive' organizations claimed to 'slam the action of female students of Jamia Hafsa who have become pawns in the hands of political forces and use religion to gain political power and control over the state. WAF activists also organized a street protest in Lahore against the actions of the Jamia Hafsa women students, for which they were arrested by the local administration" (Zia, 2007). "There are a couple of points that need to be addressed here. First, twenty-five years ago, when the 'progressive women's movement' was protesting dictatorial rule, women would apply direct action strategies such as gherao (encirclement) of TV studios, in protest against 'misogynistic programs' or workplaces where women were harassed. Given that section 144 of the Criminal Code was almost a permanent feature, these activists would regularly risk breaking the law, and court arrest as part of their activism" (Rashid, 2006). "It was peculiar then that when the Jamia Hafsa students defied a military state and the police and resorted to illegal forms of protest, their action was condemned. Women's organizations were seen to be empowered, and they were also seen to be autonomous. Both WAF and (at least on women's issues) ST worked to a feminist agenda, over and above male politics, and hence their actions were praised as successful strategies from a sisterhood of activism". Hence, "the question that arises is why the activism of some groups is considered more autonomous than others. The Jamia Hafsa women did not proclaim political allegiance to any political party, and their activism was part of a moral crusade". In fact, "the Jamia Hafsa women were indeed following an autonomous agenda in seeking salvation for the suspected 'prostitutes' and liberating them when they repented of their activities. Prostitution has never featured in male religious rhetoric. In fact, there has been a silence on the issue, given the ambivalence in Islamic literature and also some well-documented cases where male religious leaders themselves have been accused of indulging in illicit sexual practices" (Rashid, 2006).

Conclusion

In contemporary scenario, the media has brought about a significant turn in the discourse of feminist politics in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. “The rise of new feminism — rooted in Islamic discourse, non-confrontational, privatized and personalized, whose objective is to 'empower' women within Islam -is not a post-9/11 development but rather a result of unresolved debates on the issue of religion within the progressive women's movement. It has been due to the accommodation of religion-based feminist arguments by the stronger secular feminist movement of the 1980s that paved the way for its own marginalization by giving feminist legitimacy to such voices” (Charania, 2007). The subsequent upsurge of feminism may have become weak in its success and sustenance due to inequitable laws, dictatorship, NGOs, social division, co-option by the state and political parties in the identical mode as the global women’s movement takes to a particular discourse. “Yet it has been the internal inconsistency of the political strategies as well as the personal, Muslim identities of secular feminists that have allowed Islamic feminists to redefine the feminist agenda in Pakistan” (Hasan, 2002). The greater worry over the intensification of a new generation of Islamic revivalist feminists who seek to justify all rights for women within religious structure and reduce secular feminism extraneous while framing argument on women's rights exclusively around Islamic antiquity, ethos and custom. “The danger is that a debate such as this will be premised on a polarized 'good' vs. 'bad' Muslim woman, such that women who abide by the liberal interpretation of theology will be pitted against those who follow a strict and literal interpreters’ mode and associate themselves with male religio-political discourse” (Brohi, 2006). This has prospects to generate a new, radicalized, religio-political feminism leading Pakistan's political future.

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