

## THE ONTOLOGY OF FEMINISM IN RELEVANCE TO PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

This research study is a secondary review that focuses on feminism and the way it is perceived. Feminism and its objectives are very clear and known to almost every feminist activist, however, the concept of feminism and its promulgation is completely contrary to its primary objectives. In Pakistan, feminism has a long and very bright history in ending violence against women and encouraging women to participate in every economic, social and political opportunity. But in recent past some feminist activists tarnished the clear name of feminism. *Aurat March* and its propagators are literally deviant who raise slogans like *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* (My Body My Choice) to demand complete bodily autonomy. Autonomy that transcends every legal and social norm – completely instinctual with no grasp of reality. This movement has destroyed the fair name of feminism and it is perceived as a group of women demanding bodily autonomy and challenging religious and cultural norms. But their stance on promulgating women sexuality and sexual autonomy failed to attract attention rather than resulted in huge dissociation of people from mainstream feminism. The kind of equality or freedom demanded by women in *Aurat March* was totally sexuality-centric and radical that reflected their hidden agenda of promoting sexuality rather than demanding inheritance rights, equal treatment or protection against violence.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Aurat March, Woman Sexuality,

### Introduction

The feminist movements in Pakistan received huge criticism for promoting Westernization and undermining traditional values. Feminist movements led thousands of women toward liberation and emancipation, which was perceived as a threat to traditional norms and values (Khan et al., 2012). However, other scholars highlighted the significance of conservative women's organizations and their role in shaping the movement. Research focused on women's involvement in faith-based organization and religious revival, such as Al-Huda Trust played a positive role in protection to women (Hussain, 2014; Mushtaq, 2010). However, recently, the *Aurat March* (women's march) emerged as a significant manifestation of the Western agenda in

Pakistan. The march, which celebrated International Women's Day, was held in Pakistan in 2018. The charter of demands included issues such as domestic violence, workplace harassment, empowerment of women with disabilities, maternity leaves, and employment rights. While critics argued that the Aurat March promoted Westernized values and sparked controversies (Rehman, 2019). Aurat March faced criticism for addressing topics long considered as taboo in Pakistan. Its slogans and demands were labeled as "Westernized" by conservatives, who accused the March promoting values that go against the country's cultural and religious heritage (Batool & Malik, 2021).

Women comprise half of the global population, but they face marginalization inequality, various forms of subordination worldwide. Historically, women's role was not inferior to men's, and they contributed equally to society before the Industrial Revolution. Nevertheless, the Industrial Revolution between 1750 or whatever and around 1820-40 in England which spread to other parts brought a seismic shift on global social baseline that entered new era of discrimination and exploitation (Mahajan, 2019). Men started to enter the workforce with full force and women were stuck in domestic role having no power on social, political or economic grounds. Industrialization also gave rise to a new class system, with more aristocratic social structure (Anderson & Zinsser, 2000). Though, feminism is an ideology for gender equality, ending violence against women and guaranteeing equal opportunities of participation, however, the common perception of feminism varies from society to society. Essentially, feminism is about providing women with the same resources and opportunities as those available for men (Delaney, 2005).

Feminism has a long history in Western societies, where women struggled for their rights, such as right to vote, reproductive rights, and other fundamental rights for years (Agger, 1998). With the increase in awareness among women on how their gender affected their lives the momentum in feminist movements also gained strength and this struggle kept continued by challenging male-dominated social structure and hegemonic familial and social relationship (Kuleli, 2019).

### **The Concept of Feminism**

Feminism is a complex and multifaceted concept with various meanings and interpretations. It encompasses cultural, political and social aspects with more philosophical and theoretical construction of gender discrimination and violence against women. Feminism seeks to challenge abuse of power, promote equality and justice and eliminate disparities in all fields of life and to remove barriers of class, caste, and economic status (Hundleby, 2012). Putting in view their stance to voice the violence that takes place against women in the world, many scholars, activists and politicians associate themselves with the slogan of feminism and they call themselves as feminists. Challenging sexism and male dominancy are the fundamental aspects of feminism to which not only women but men as well associate themselves. Plato (427-347 BC) once claimed that women have embedded capabilities vested in their biological construction which may never be infringed upon (Scott, 1996).

Feminism first emerged in France and this word was coined by Charles Fourier, a French philosopher and an inspirational figure of socialism and women's emancipation (Herouach, 2019). In the 1880s-Feminism as a socio-political movement was born out of France that was identified to advocate for gender equality through demonstrations and socio-political activism (Herouach, 2019). In 1910, the movement took place in the USA (Hilversum,1994) and some years later it extended to other countries as well particularly United Kingdom, Russia and China (Raj & Davinson, 2014). The later period in history was constantly adorned by the feminist movements in the world, however, feminism as a sole political movement dated back to 1791

when Olympe de Gouges penned the "declaration of the rights of women and female citizens" an equal right demanded by woman on same publication "The Rights of Man and Citizen", during French Revolution (Mousset,2007).

In 1963 Betty Friedan, wrote "The Feminine Mystique" which, shed light on restriction and limitations on women's roles in society. Rights such as right to vote and participate and own property were highly infringed upon because women were expected to prioritize domestic duties, which led them to face issues like domestic violence and anxiety. Friedan argued that women need economic independence and equal opportunities to achieve human dignity (Friedan, 1963). It means that feminism is a broad movement that encompasses various cultural and social phenomena aimed at achieving freedom and equality for women. Its fundamental principle is to enable women to work for wages and become independent in different fields of life (Malinowska, 2020) and eliminate gender-based inequalities through institutional and grassroot efforts. It also aimed to disclose the male dominating role in subjugating women to unleash them from these bondages and to secure equal rights for them in economic, political, and social spheres (Brunell & Burkett, 2019). Feminism also supports women's fights for reproductive rights and bodily autonomy economic independence and freedom to take decisions about their lives and sexuality - liberation from all forms of oppression.

### **The Historical Perspective**

A Tradition of Activism and Mobilization of Women in Pakistan have a rich history of collective struggle dated back to the British colonial era. They even played a great role in three influential political activities: educational reform movement, unitedly with the Khilafat motion and Pakistan independence movement (Yaqoob & Hussain 2014; Naz, 2011; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). When Pakistan was founded as an independent country, advocacy continued through the women's organizations such as All-Pakistan Women Association (APWA). Men responded by invoking the authority of both patriarchal and religious discourses to justify segregation and curtail women's freedom in public life (Jafar, 2005). Despite of these challenges, women's rights remained a crucial issue in Pakistan, with various stakeholders, including the government, NGOs, and international actors, negotiating and advocating for women's empowerment. The independence struggle empowered Muslim women to break through traditional barriers, challenge colonial rule, and engage in political representation (Jafar, 2005; Rehman, 2019).

For the first few years of Pakistan, there was a general upsurge in public and political participation by women, but momentum of progression disappeared quite rapidly. The adoption of the 1962 Muslim Family Laws Ordinance led to considerable discussion and debate on women's role and participation in familial and societal activities. However, the overthrowing of Fathma Jinnah by a male military dictator further disappointed the mainstream social and political women activists (Jafar, 2005; Rehman, 2019). However, Bhutto's regime (1971-79), witnessed advancement in women's movements with employment opportunities being enlarged to allow full participation by all citizens as mandated under Article 25 (Jafar, 2005; Rehman, 2019).

A vibrant women's movement emerged in the 1980s, led by the Women Action Forum (WAF), to counter discrimination and restore democracy (Jafar, 2005). At the end of Zia's regime in 1988, WAF expanded its activities to every city (Saigol, 2018). The 1990s were marked by governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, with the approval of CEDAW (International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) in 1996, representing a land-mark for women's rights (Saigol, 2016; Naz and Ahmed, 2012; Raza Ullah,

2018; Jafar, 2005; Laumann, 2000; Weiss, 1994). These legislative and social changes foreshadowed the thoughts of thousands of social activists particularly women.

### **Mainstream Dogma**

Women and their socio-economic problems and the movements and programs for the resolution of these problems are constantly defined and re-defined to bring a dynamic change in their living standard and emancipation. The mainstream literature is covering abundant of such stories and legislation processes and there are thousands of organizations that work for women, however, the common perception in societies plagued by such movements like Aurat March (Woman Movement) is totally different. In the following passage we discussed a brief review of the mainstream literature that highlights their problems. In the subsequent paragraphs we discussed and analyzed the common perception about feminism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

In Pakistan and particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa women are expected to nurse their children and carry out their household duties or “take less adventurous” jobs (Raza Ullah, 2018). Women are not allowed to work for wages and generate income for themselves either through self-employment or working in the corporate world (Ibid), thus majority of them are invisible in the wage-earning process of their houses (Naz and Ahmed, 2012). In any society, both men and women are crucial for growth and development. Empowering both genders is essential, but in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, women face specific challenges. They are expected to prioritize family care and domestic duties over economic independence and education (Raza Ullah, 2018).

Research has shown that in rural areas, females' work is often limited to agricultural activities, which is not recognized as part of their household responsibilities (Saigol, 2016). This perpetuates the invisibility of women's contributions and reinforces gender roles. Men, on the other hand, are by tradition seen as the breadwinners and heads of households which keep them dominant (Naz, 2012). Women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face significant challenges, being largely excluded from political activities, decision-making, and economic opportunities. They are confined to agriculture, doing domestic duties, with their contributions often ignored and invisible. Men, on the other hand, hold authority as fathers, husbands, and protective leaders. Women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face numerous taboos and restrictions that prevent them from participating in community services and public life (Taylor and Martin, 2001; Naz, 2011). Women's contributions and work are often overlooked and undervalued in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This is due to the prevalent Pashtun culture, which restricts their participation in the corporate world. As a result, women's work remains invisible and unrecognized, perpetuating gender inequality (Momsen, 2006).

Empowerment basically breeds from participation and ownership of equal share in the inheritance and decision-making process, however, in Pakistan, rural women face restrictions in expressing their desires, including mate selection, family decisions, and family size, due to the joint family system. Pashtun women are often denied their right to divorce, while men enjoy this authority (Ali & Sultan, 1999; Naz, 2011; Kristof, 2009; Handy, 2004; Raza Ullah, 2018 & Gholipour, 2009). This problem basically breeds from the prevailing patriarchal social structure ingrained in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's culture, perpetuating gender stereotypes and hindering females' empowerment (Naz, 2011).

The position of women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is significantly inferior to other Pakistani provinces, with limited participation in the corporate world and legal spheres. Women's political participation is hindered by patriarchy, male dominance, and socio-cultural and economic factors such as illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment (Mahpara Begum, 2011). Patriarchal social

structure along with other factors constrains women's empowerment and breeds gender discrimination (Raza Ullah, 2018). The Pakhtun social structure in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is male-dominated, hindering women's empowerment and development (Naz & Hafeez-ur-Rehamn Chaudhry, 2012). Domestic violence is a significant concern causing chronic stress and even deaths among women (Saiyid, 2001).

These practices are not limited to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa only, rather the same practices prevail in other parts of the country. Women have long been subjected to systemic gender discrimination and are considered second-class citizens, facing obstacles in different spheres of life that delay their progress. Despite of the fact that women comprising half of the population but their political empowerment remains limited. It is essential to recognize that any efforts aimed at societal development will be ineffective without women's liberation. As Saiyid (2001) argued, the lack of women's civil liberties is a result of government incompetence, highlighting the need for addressing these disparities to achieve true progress. In Pakistan women's lives are shaped by diverse cultural, social, and economic factors (Shah, 1989), however, it is widely acknowledged that women face significant barriers to accessing different facilities, jobs and political participation (UNICEF, 1988).

### **The Ontology of Feminism**

The common perception developed about feminism is totally different than the mainstream inculcated doctrine. The mainstream literature mainly focuses on the problems faced by women in the rural and urban setup in the developing world. Many national and international non-governmental organizations have been engaged in resolving these problems by running different programs to ensure women participation in the educational and job opportunities. However, these programs of indoctrination have resulted in developing a negative perception among the common people. On electronic and print media, feminism and the underlying movements of feminism particularly on the name of *Aurat March* are given colossal coverage. The slogan which they have raised is far away from the mainstream feminist philosophy. The popular objective of the mainstream feminism is to bring equality in terms of participation and ownership and to end all kinds of violence/discrimination against women, while the problems voiced in the *Aurat March* are entirely different than the objectives of feminism.

Realistically, *Aurat March* was neither a feminist nor a socialist movement, rather it was a separatist movement on the ground that they challenged their biological construction as women by clearly denying their womanhood to warm the beds for men and to give birth to their offsprings. Many women displayed their cards with some slogans written on these cards which clearly reflected narcissism vested in their past miserable sexual relationship. Aggressive and blunt expression of their sexual urges in public exposed their extreme sexual frustration caused by constant promiscuity. Majority of the women in *Aurat March* were deviant who raised slogans like *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* (My Body My Choice). These slogans were raised to demand complete bodily autonomy. Autonomy that transcended every legal and social norm – completely instinctual with no grasp of reality.

Femininity or womanhood is a biological characteristic that distinguishes women from men and literally it is a divine endowment that is given high respect in Islamic Sharia and the same esteem and privilege is a social norm across Pakistan. However, many female activists and so-called feminists for their own padded gains keep on promulgating femininity as a stigma. The mysterious construction and re-construction of femininity/womanhood like calling woman a “commodity” usually radiates from social and political forums, ornamented by these so-called feminists. Calling a woman a “commodity” is realistically more degrading and derogatory which

reflects the negative mentality of these women who work for the protection of women. The programs they run for the protection of women, have no grasp of reality rather they are the counterfeit of some western radicalism. Literally, the radical feminists were not that much blunt in their proclamation the way *Aurat March* was in challenging the established pattern of behavior. Where young girls were highly motivated to be bold and more liberal in their sexual relationship.

Usually, thousands of women/feminists do not marry because they want to be more independent rather than subjugated by men. This practice is very common in Pakistan as well as in other countries. This practice is carried out by many young girls who are motivated by their peer feminists to be more independent. They get highly influenced by a kind of liberty and autonomy in the feminist circles which contaminate their minds and develops resentment against males. Primarily, they challenge the norms of relationship and develop their own rituals in treating men like slaves. They know the power of their sexuality – the vaginal vigor – and the art of seduction to subjugate men and treat them like slaves. They challenge every single familial and social norm of relationship and value the feminist rituals. Though, this autonomy gives them more economic and social power to dominate their relationship as long they are young and energetic, however, maintaining this hegemonic sexuality leads them unconsciously surrender to their erotic life instincts – promiscuity. This behavior breeds an unending resentment and hate against the common flock, associated with their social and religious norms and values.

Feminism or the feminist movement in Pakistan has no clear objectives or their propagators do not know what and how to proceed with. Their objectives may be relevant to that of mainstream feminism but what they promulgate in their processions are far away from the objectives of mainstream feminism. Equality can never be sex-centric rather equality means equal treatment or equal access to state services and resources. Ending domestic violence against women and ensuring share of women in inheritance must dominate every feminist circle. Every individual whose activism focuses on these rights is called a feminist. While promulgating the slogan of *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* means no less than devaluing sexuality – the worth of which is incomparable.

## Conclusion

Feminism in Pakistan did not progress the way it showed progression in the USA and Europe. Many institutional changes and legal amendments in Europe for the protection of women rights were basically the impacts of feminist movements that took place in the USA and Europe. However, feminism did not show any such progression in the rest of the world, particularly in Pakistan because of diversion of feminists from the main agenda/objectives of feminism. The mainstream feminism mainly focused on the elimination of all kinds of discrimination against women, ending domestic and other violence against women and ensuring equal treatment but the feminist movements that took place in Pakistan, lacked these objectives.

Aurat March has been one of those feminist movements that ignited huge debate against feminism in Pakistan because of their demand for sexual autonomy which is a challenge to both the existing legal and religious norms and traditional cultural values. That is why Aurat March received huge criticism across political, social and religious groups and associations. Their stance on promulgating women sexuality and sexual autonomy failed to attract attention rather resulted in huge dissociation of people from mainstream feminism. The kind of equality or freedom demanded by women in Aurat March was totally sexuality-centric and radical that reflected their hidden agenda of promoting sexuality rather than demanding inheritance rights, equal treatment or protection against violence. This movement was entirely a separatist

movement rather than a movement for bringing equality or guaranteeing equal rights or treatment of women in all fields of life including education, jobs, familial relationship recreation, health and competition.

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