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Sloganeering at Pakistani Aurat (women) March: A Diffractive Reading

Shehr Bano Zaidi

Assistant Professor, English Graduate Studies, National University Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan

Article Info
*Corresponding author: (S. B. Zaidi)
Corresponding Author email
sbzaidi@numl.edu.pk

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Abstract

This paper presents a diffractive reading of the slogans used in the annual Aurat March in Pakistan, a feminist event often criticized for allegedly promoting Western ideologies and disrupting local cultural values. By employing an agential realist framework, this study explores the entanglements between the postcolonial and the colonial, the divided and undivided histories of the subcontinent, and the complex intersections of patriarchy and feminism in Pakistan. Through a reworlding of the march's discourse, the analysis highlights how its slogans negotiate between indigenous feminist expressions and transnational feminist currents. Furthermore, the study examines the relational dynamics between Aurat March and its counter-movements, Haya March and Mard March, uncovering the broader socio-political contestations that shape feminist activism in Pakistan. Ultimately, this work underscores the possibilities and limitations of feminist resistance within a historically and culturally layered landscape..

Introduction

This study reimagines a women's annual protest march, held in Pakistan, called the *Aurat March* (italicized for emphasis; non-italicized henceforth). The word 'aurat' is translated as 'woman' in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan. Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism is used as a lens in an attempt to entangle Aurat March to Undivided India, the former British colonizers and two other response marches, *Haya March* ('haya' is translated as modesty) and *Mard March* ('mard' is translated as man or men). (Both *Haya March* and *Mard March* are italicized for emphasis and are non-italicized henceforth.) The latter two are seen as representing mostly Eastern patriarchal values whereas the Aurat March is routinely accused of being inspired by the Western feminism, receiving financial and moral support from Western advocates of women freedom, and, resultantly, spreading the West's supposed 'depravity'.

Pakistan which is a comparatively young nation was carved out of the Imperial India in 1947, and as such retains a link with the past in many of its practices. The struggle for gender equality had started during the days of the Britishers, and Indian women, across the religious spectrum, stood shoulder-to-shoulder challenging the patriarchy to demand a better life. They even participated in British suffragette movement (Mukerjee, 2020). The struggle back home was an uphill one as, at times, the colonizer would perpetuate certain patriarchal practices in order to justify and prolong their own rule (Liddle and Joshi, 1985). Towards the end of the colonial era, the women's rights movement was over-shadowed by nationalistic sentiments as the Indian men convinced their women to put the demand for their rights on the back burner, and instead, first fight together to push the colonizer out.

This paper refers to Indian women's struggle as the women rights movement in the Indo-Pak sub- continent started in United India. Since 1947, women, on both sides, have maintained their struggle in various ways that may be comparable for a deeper and richer understanding. There is an increasing number of voices advocating for studies that go beyond the strictly nationalist lines and encompass the region of South Asia. For example, Loomba and Lukose's observation that 'in studying such partial conceptions of the nation, however critically, we run the risk of replicating their exclusions by letting the part we study stand in for the whole we wish to theorize' (2012, p.9) is important in this context.

Literature Review: Academic Presence of the Aurat March

While most studies on women's protests in Pakistan begin their accounts from the late 1970s (Jilani, 1985;

Shaheed, 2017; Khan, 2018; Akhtar, Aziz et al., 2019; Kamal, 2021), when General Zia, a military dictator, took over and gradually curtailed women's rights in the country, this paper argues that it is necessary to trace the origins of the Pakistani Aurat March back to the colonial days of Imperial India. The British colonization of India officially began in 1857 and ended in 1947; it was not a single event but rather carved up Imperial India into two separate, often unfriendly countries: Pakistan and India. Bangladesh, once part of Pakistan, broke away in 1971, allegedly with Indian support, souring the already tense Pakistan-India relations. While politicians from the two countries may seem to be at loggerheads for the most part, women from both sides of the border draw inspiration from and find parallels with each other. Some aspects of the fight for women's rights in Pakistan are co-constituted with those of their Indian counterparts; 'a link with the past' (Barad, 2014, p.182) is retained. The approach taken by academics and women's rights activists like Taneja (2005), Basu (2010), Loomba and Lukose (2012), Roy (2012), Rani (2020), and Gupta (2021) from India, as well as Khan (2018), Afzal-Khan (2022), and Rehman & Sabreen (2022) from Pakistan, suggests a renewed realization that deeper and newer understandings can emerge from studies that include contextualization at a broader level. 'For the lives and identities of women of the region, there is more that unites than separates' (Roy, 2012, p. 5).

Although the Aurat March is just 6 years old, it has received considerable academic attention, both nationally and internationally. A defining feature of the works is a sense of impossibility of convergence of views between the march's supporters and the naysayers. The majority discuss the Aurat March in a positive or neutral tone (e.g., Batool & Malik, 2021; Kamal. 2021), though there are some who denounce the march outright (e.g., Khushbakht & Sultana, 2020).

Kamal (2021, p.227) draws on networking theory to understand how both the Aurat March and the Mard March 'network' to deconstruct the other. In relation to the Aurat March being labelled as un-Islamic, Kamal agrees with Khan & Kirmani (as cited in Kamaal, 2021, p. 223) that women's bodies are seen as 'symbols of the Islamic nation'. Any move to shed-off the patriarchal shackles is viewed as a direct attack on Islam by the West or its 'supporters' here. This strategy has been effective as it not only diminishes the support but makes women rights controversial. It is also noteworthy that this is not a new strategy, rather since the times of colonialism, Muslim men have portrayed the West as the evil out to corrupt the Muslim women as a war strategy against the Muslim men. Frantz Fanon (1959 [2003], p. 43) is a case in point who calls the veil as 'the bone of contention' between the colonial forces and the locals writing in his famous essay *Algeria Unveiled*. Muslim women are considered as the first line of defense and if they succumb to the Western notion of life, men will be deemed as conquered by the colonizing forces.

Batool & Malik (2021) who point out that, although the 'event is organic and inclusive' (p. 321), it is unfortunately labelled as a 'western conspiracy' that is 'determined to corrupt and destroy the social, cultural, and religious values of an Islamic society' (p. 317). Amer et al. (2019, p. 136) agree with Batool & Malik above in that the *Aurat March* is 'a local voice'. They, however, choose to look at it as a 'Pakistani variant' of the global movement for women's rights. Women's movements across the globe share some similarities, and also affinities. Women from all over may draw inspiration from each other and learn from each other's experiences, but they choose their battles themselves.

Sadaf and Siitonen's (2022, p.5) study on social media storylines revolves around '[t]he women who stray from the path, and the men who will return them to it', and that 'Islam under threat from the outside'. They remark that most users of the social media found the march un-Islamic, and expressed alarm at the way Islam was targeted by the Aurat March supporters. Baig et al. (2020, p. 426) rightly point out that only a partial picture of the march is given, creating 'false identities and ideologies' to defame it. The essence of the movement is lost somewhere in its biased portrayal which makes the work of the activists harder. Likewise, Saleem and Nisar (2022, p. 10) suggest that by 'employing popular religious rhetoric' the discourse is 'half-informed and misinterpreted'.

A study by Khushbakht and Sultana (2020, p. 54) finds the march not conforming to either 'the Islamic teachings state laws and public customs or traditions'; therefore, it does not have anything to do with Pakistani society. What is noteworthy is that despite calling the march (2020, p. 61) 'worthless' and 'meaningless', they admit that it remains 'a contested matter'.

Methodology: Unpacking Agential Realism as an Entangled Methodology

An agential realist study uses an apparatus to configure (study afresh) reality. The apparatus that I use for my work is made up of two interrelated practices, colonialism and patriarchy. The 'two hegemonies resulting in sexualized and racialized mindset' as experienced by women in Pakistan (and Undivided India) is aptly conceptualized in a single but double-barrel term called 'patriarchal colonialism' by Guerrero (2003, p. 58). This apparatus of patriarchal colonialism acts as a 'measuring tool' (Prugl, 2020) and produce a phenomenon called the Aurat March (and its co-marches) by applying agential cuts- an intra-activity through which 'phenomena come to matter' (Barad, 2007, p. 140); these cuts are a boundary making tool which produce 'temporary separation between entanglements' (Bozalek

& Fullagar, 2022, p. 30). As new patterns emerge, old ones do not disappear; either they get re/mattered or they lie dormant for a new re/configuring. A quality of apparatuses is that they are 'not individually separable or determinate, since they are always already implicated in ongoing intra-actions and enfoldings' (Barad, 2007, p. 450) with the phenomenon. The world is 'remade again' (Barad, 2007, p. 185) every time an ethico-onto-epistemological framework which rests on the 'intertwining' of ethics, knowing and being (2007, p. 185), is applied.

When Barad claim that a phenomenon ought to employ diffraction for a material-discursive reading, there are a number of concepts that need unpacking. Starting with diffraction, a diffracted reading of a text or situation is analogous with the patterns that waves (air or water) make, and remake, when they hit an obstacle (Barad, 2007, p.28). Every time, the waves come across a hurdle, they form new patterns by overlapping (without breaking up). Barad use the term in place of reflection which is 'insufficient' (Barad, 2007, p.50) to induce a sympathetic, responsible intervention, interference in matters that matter. Borrowing the concept of diffraction form Donna Haraway (Barad, 2007, p.28), Barad point out that diffraction attends to differences as opposed to reflection which only reflects sameness. This reading is not hierarchical (theories preceding texts) but is dialogical (Geerts & van der Tuin, 2021, p. 175). Terms like diffraction, entanglements, becomings, co-relationalities refer to the constituting property of a phenomenon as it is produced in a co-relational manner where the relations that constitute it must 'precede' the products which 'arise through relationships' (Bozalek & Fullagar, 2022, p. 30). The resulting slogans further result into the 'becoming' of two other marches, Mard and Haya.

As pointed out above, a diffractive reading rests on a concept of material-discursivities which Barad (2007) elaborate within the confines of ontology and semantic. Material-discursive practices constitute phenomena by entangling ontology and semantics. Ontology is reconfigured phenomena and not some pre-existing 'things' whereas semantics is a material-discursive practice and not just 'words'. Material-discursivity as a theoretical construct does not differentiate between matter and meaning: '[m]atter and meaning are not separate elements' (Barad, 2007, p.3). A material-discursive rendering is likened to 'a differential dance of intelligibility and unintelligibility' and 'an on-going performance' (Barad, 2014, p.148). In my study, this means that the focus is not just on the language that is used in slogans (be it the present marches or the pre-partition ones) and the various analyses based on this language use and commentaries, but the material practices through which slogans are enacted (performed). The materialities refer to, for instance, the dressing style of placard-holders, the various court cases that are initiated every year against the Aurat March organizers, the physical stopping of the marching women (one year, the Aurat Marchers were hurled with stones, resultantly some women were injured), the role of the competing marches, etc.

Barad use forward slashes (/) and parentheses ( ) to indicate how a phenomenon is configured for the present iteration of reality and may be different in future or past. Inclusions may become exclusions and vice versa. Defining any rendering of reality through its im/possibilities and dis/continuities thus is keeping with the philosophy of the agential realism. Barad (2014, p.1) call it a 'cut together-apart (one move)' to draw attention to phenomena's state of 'in/determinacy' or/and 'simultaneity' (Rogowska-Stangret, 2018, p. 3). For example, the re/formulation of the Aurat March does not negate the previous re/renderings or claims to be the final one. It is a 're-turn' to a re/reading without 'absolute separations' with the past or amongst the phenomena or the apparatuses.

Data Analysis

Pre/Partition Entanglements

The tale of pre/partition Indian women's fight for rights as entangled with/in the apparatuses of colonialism and patriarchy has many shades and contours. From the in/sincerity of the British towards the cause of women rights, to the Indian men urging the women to put their rights' agenda on the backburner as they fought together to make the colonizers leave their land, to divisions within the nationalist agenda of Indians on the basis on religion, to fighting for British suffragette, Indian women have shown that they can fight for their and others' rights.

Starting with the duplicity of the British colonizing forces (present to-date in the form of West supporting those powers in third world countries that oppress women), the colonizing British saw themselves as 'a force for enlightenment, especially for women' (Liddle and Joshi, 1985, p. 522), encouraging Indian women to strive for 'liberation' (Maragaret Cousins in Taneja, 2005, p. 117). This collided with the simultaneous validation of certain patriarchal laws and practices. Liddle and Joshi (1985, p. 524) point out how the duplicitous colonizers used patriarchy as 'one of their favorite justifications for foreign rule'. It is outside the scope of this study to go into the details of how a legal cover was provided for women subordination. Suffice to say that it taught a lesson- relevant after a century also- to the women that they had no sincere friends in their struggle for an honorable life as defined by themselves, and that they had to fight it out themselves.

The patriarchal colonial apparatus distributed agency in ways that simultaneously fostered first women's oppression and then their resistance. While it kept the upper- and middle-class women indoors, it forced the poor women to venture outdoors to earn a livelihood alongside the men. In the words of Basu and Bharatairy (1990, p. 1),

this resulted in the poor women enjoying 'more freedom' than their middle- and upper-class contemporaries. The demands or needs of women across the various strata of the Indian society were not so homogeneous. The agential cuts made by nationalism (as enacted by patriarchy in opposition to colonialism), convinced the women to push their demand for rights to the background- from where they still have to fully retrieve them- in order to throw colonizers out (Jilani as cited in Khan, 2018, p.24). Jilani, writing about Pakistani women, complains (p.24) that the freedom fighters (fighting on a twin agenda, i.e, freedom from the British and a separate country) 'used women for the Pakistan movement, brought them in the front but only on their agenda, not on a women's agenda', echoes of betrayal and a breach that seems unbridged even now.

Until Partition, Indian women were a united front against patriarchy and colonization (Basu, 2010; Rani, 2020; Taneja, 2005; Khan, 2018), but the partition divided the women, 'depriving them of the opportunity to campaign across the religious divide for their rights, as they had, to some extent, until then' (Khan, p. 24). The rhetoric of nationalism was not just directed at the colonizers, but it worked inwards, also, in the sense that it sowed discontent and mistrust between the two main communities, Hindus and Muslims. This eventually led to the creation of two nations after the freedom from the British.

The distrust that was created between the two communities of Hindus and Muslims, at the time of Partition has not ceased to manifest itself and is evident in some Indian post-colonial theorists like Leela Gandhi (1998) whose work *Post colonial theory: a critical inquiry* makes the Muslim women in Undivided India in/visible. The work seems to pretend that Muslims in Undivided India never mattered. This is, however, not the case with Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) who is also an Indian and does not exclude Muslims from her postulations on veil. Gandhi omits the enactment of purdah (1998, p. 94) in India and focuses only on Fanon and how he intertwined the issues of veil with colonialism in Algeria. While referring to the points raised by Mohanty, Gandhi (pp.85-6) again decides to deal with all other angles except veiling in Indian Muslim women. Some other writers for instance Zia (a Pakistani) and Roy (an Indian) attempt to fill in the gap of Gandhi's omission by pointing out that (Zia, 2018, p. 47) 'Indian women of both faiths rose above their communal specificities (that reified womanhood) motivated by a collective interest' (2018, p. 47).

The differentiating act of in/visibility by Gandhi may be re/configured by focusing on the 'commonalities' (Khan, 2018, p.24) between the Muslims and Hindus not just in India, but Pakistan also, for the common good. The two countries are no longer together, but, the women can reach across the border for their common good; the former spirit of sisterhood can be recreated. The agential cuts made by colonialism, patriarchy and Partition produce(d) im/permanent boundaries.

Women Movement in Pakistan as a Precursor to the Aurat March

Educated women belonging to upper and middle-class continued to protest even after the creation of Pakistan as patriarchy followed them here as well. In the two figures below (figure 1 and figure 2), it may be seen that the women getting beaten up by the police are not poor women. These women by virtue of their education and social status were in a position to firstly, know what was going on and, secondly, to devise a plan to fight back. The material-discursivity includes not just what is visible in the picture but the recently enacted law, also. This law stipulated victims of rape women to produce four male witnesses of good repute. The women argued (and rightly so) that how as it possible that a rapist would commit the offence in front of four men of good repute. Would not they stop him? According to this law, no woman who was raped, could lodge a complaint as she would be unable to bring witnesses and would instead be booked for co-sensual sex. The identity of a Pakistani woman was defined not just discursively but materially, also. Moreover, these women came out on the streets with heads uncovered and must have faced condemnation for it also, along with what they were demanding. The same can be seen in observations regarding the Aurat March where women are also castigated for not following the easter attire and thus spreading nudity along with challenging other patriarchal norms.

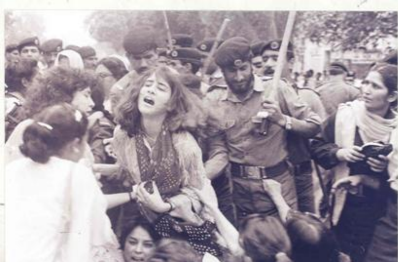

Figure 1: *Lahore, Feb 12, 1983: Police brutality on the women's demonstration against the 'Law of Evidence' catapulted the nascent women's movement into the limelight,* (Yusuf, 2006).

Figure 2: *Women's rights demonstration in Lahore, Feb 12, 1983.* Photo: Rahat Ali Dar

The 'limited rights' that were granted to Pakistani women in the initial decades following the independence (Khan, p.1) were not acceptable to them. Even they were gradually reversed or curtailed after the military coup of Gen Zia in 1977, which brought in his (patriarchal) version of Islam, targeting women (Khan, Jawed & Komal Qidwai, 2021). Jilani argues that '[i]n this process Muslim women of Pakistan became victims of their own religion' (Jilani, 1985, p.107). His patriarchy targeted women and the phenomenon *Pakistani woman* (italics for emphasis) entered into 'open confrontation with the state' (Khan, p.1). The result was 'the creation of an alienated but vocal section of elite women who triggered the modern women's movement'.

This tradition of upper- and middle-class women taking the lead to work for the women rights' in pre-Partition India, continued in the newly created state of Pakistan, but gradually it came to be labelled as an elitist event. Men would dismiss it as rich bored women fighting for women whom they did not even know and in all probability did not even care. The Aurat March has changed it. It draws not only women form the poor segment of the society, but, has compelled the conservative women and even men to come out and protest in the same manner (Haya and Mard marches).

Another aspect of the women's movement in the years leading up to the Aurat March was that the duplicitous character of the West once again came up. The women in the Undivided India had already cast aspersions on the dubious character of the Western masters (see Liddle and Joshi, 1985, above) when it came to granting women their rights and freeing them form the yoke of patriarchy. The Western in/sincerity continued to produce in/stability and in/determinacy for women's rights movement in Pakistan though there was (is) some support also. The Islamization drive in Pakistan, targeting women and minorities, had 'tacit support' from the West for over four decades (Khan, 2018, p.8) with some claiming that it still continues. The military regimes were supported by the West for its own motives. While theorists and lawmakers like Khan and Jillani blame the West for letting the women down (once again), the critics of the *Aurat March* especially the clergy who traditionally support military regimes in Pakistan, blame the march organizers on being on the payroll of the Western powers for re/creating un/Islamic ethos in the society. Pakistani women struggling for their rights in their new homeland, show up against not just patriarchy, but, the covert mis/doing(s) of the West. This brings the re/wordling of the *Aurat March* to re/consider how these historical entanglements re/constitute its current im/possibilities.

Purdah: I start this section with a picture (figure 3) of educated Pakistani women-activists burning a veil. A veil is a symbol of Muslim women's piety. It may take the shape of a large chador (shawl), a scarf or a larger outer garment (similar to a long, loose coat) called a burqa. The act of a woman covering herself up in front of strangers is called purdah. Going back to its roots, purdah is a Persian word meaning 'seclusion of women' (Basu & Bharatairy, 1990, p. 70). Though I start with a picture of Pakistani women burning the veil, this section re/imagines the act of purdah as practiced in the Undivided India amongst both Hindu and Muslim women and bring it to Pakistan. Contrary to the general perception that only Muslim women observed purdah, Basu and Bharatairy (1990, 70) point out that purdah was/is used 'to describe a whole continuum of custom observed by about one-third of Indian women, Hindu and Muslim'. When women decided to do away with it, it included both communities though with a varying consistency.

Figure 3: *WAF activists burn their dupattas [veils] in Lahore, Pakistan* (Khan, 1987, p. 95)

I view the phenomenon of purdah produced by the apparatuses of post/colonialism and patriarchy where each apparatus makes agential cuts to enact the phenomenon of purdah. Purdah as an 'ongoing, open-ended, entangled material practice[s]' (Barad, 2007, p.168) is still a contested matter. Drawing a performative account of purdah, they further claim that women from across the religious divide 'covered the face, head and lowering of the gaze'- the agential activity of patriarchy cut them (the Indian women) together/apart (Barad, 2014, p.176). The together-apart refers to the situation that the women were together in some ways and apart in some other ways. As purdah materializes through the protest marches, the past link with the Indian women is not severed (Barad, 2007).

It is pertinent to mention here that this account figures not just Muslim theorists, but, I draw upon Indian and English writers also. The 19th century India (Basu & Bharatairy, 1990, p. 70) is reincarnated by Farida Shaheed (2017, p. 113-4) when she points to the unbreakable link between clothes (purdah) and a woman's character- something that can be seen in the Aurat March and its resistance. The Islamisation drive, carried out post 1977, in Pakistan introduced a new dress code for 'good', 'Muslim' and 'Eastern women'; 'women were regularly presented chadors as gifts'. A 'chador' is a shawl that women in this part of the world are required to drape themselves with for modesty reasons. Pakistan's pace of Islamisation was matched by controls put on women. In Ayesha Khan's (2018, p. 9) words, 'Pakistan's Islamic credentials would be writ large on their bodies, with new controls over sex, marriage, apparel and mobility demarcating a diminished place for them'. While India was moving towards 'liberating' women, citing purdah as 'danger to health and happiness' (Basu & Bharatairy, 1990, p.71), there was an effort to move Pakistan backwards- something that women protests here have tried to resist.

Indian women (Muslims and Hindus alike but Muslims more) were exhorted to follow the Turkish women to 'break with the tradition'- a tradition which is in Mirza Hamid's (1935, p. 276) an 'evil' and responsible for 'political stagnation, social misery and educational suicide of the Muslims'. Shaista S. Ikramullah, an Indian till 1947 and a Pakistani since then, in her 1963- book, *From Purdah to Parliament,* makes a very meaningful comment in her book's dedication. She dedicates it 'to my husband who took me out of purdah and has regretted it ever since', which humorously encapsulates the ambivalent relationship of both men and women with purdah.

Purdah theorized from the Western women's eyes sheds light on not just the female perspective but entangles it with colonizers and the concept of 'self' and 'other'. The following lines demonstrate how material-discursive arrangements of purdah in their in/stability is generated through the observations of two western women (Jeffery and Cook) who encountered purdah in Pakistan and India (only Muslims) in recent times, can enrich the debate. Patricia Jeffery (2000) travelled to both Pakistan and India for her book *Frogs in a Well* (2000) and met women on both sides of the border. Nancy Cook (2005) draws on her experience of working with a Western NGO in a remote part of Pakistan. Both Jeffery and Cook make very powerful comments regarding purdah. Neither shies away from truthfully giving her opinions. Patricia Jeffery calls her initial reaction as a 'distaste for purdah' (p.2). In material-discursivity terms, her account is built with images of veiled women unable to cross the road or 'losing their way in the city' (p. 11-12). The ambivalence in the phenomenon is created when Jeffery (p. 13) after criticizing purdah, presents a counter argument '[p]urdah may restrict and seclude, but, it also shelters'. Maybe this is the ambivalence that can be discerned in Shaista Ikramullah's (1963) book dedication given a few lines above.

Nancy Cook's (2005) account of what clothes mean in the Pakistani city of Gilgit, ties in with what Khan (2018) and Shaheed (2017) have stated earlier. Cook entangles the choice of clothes with the 'salient practices of power, discursive practices that are the contingent legacy, among other factors, of the colonial period and the norms and values that were developed and contested at that time' (Cook, p. 2005, 353). The younger western women's stance of considering Pakistani women's dress (which is loose enough to hide a woman's curves) as a sign of 'oppression and backwardness' (p.366) is an act of 'othering'. They do not consider veiled women as modern or enlightened as they themselves are. Adding to the ambivalence, the older Western women, prefer the baggy clothes as they hide their aging bodies in Cook's (2005) study. They happily wear it in public as it gives them acceptability and respectability- both notions point to the material and discursive in/stability attached with the concept of purdah/clothes.

The material-discursivity of the rivalry between the colonizers and the colonized can be seen as taking place as early as the suffragette movement in London where Indian women (from all religions) decided to stand shoulder to shoulder with their British counterparts as shown below in figure 1. Indian women holding placards supporting British women were 'objectified'(Hoque, 2019, para 4) by made to wear their ethnic dress (a saaree). The desire to support, however, did not translate into a relationship based on mutual respect. Colonialism makes agential-cuts but they are not made through men but rather women who practice 'deep-rooted' notions of 'race empire, and colonialism'.

Figure 4: *Lolita Ran participating in the Women's Coronation Procession of 1911 (Mukerjee, 2020).*

A Diffractive Account of the March(es)

This section reads the Aurat, Mard and Haya marches diffractively, at/tending to the ways in which patriarchal and (post)colonial apparatuses haunt these dynamics. I am interested in the sorts of responses that are made im/possible by the slogans that are displayed at the marches. As these slogans reconstitute the boundaries of im/possibility – matters of gendered inclusion and exclusion – I contest Khan's (2018, p. 2) suggestion that '[t]he women's movement as portrayed here represents women who, broadly, hold a secular, progressive, liberal and democratic view of how the state should be governed'. Instead, I argue that a re/configuration of the Aurat March is needed for a new iteration of the reality in the face of the resistance that the march has started to encounter lately.

The images from all three marches are grouped according to the issues they refer to. These issues are at the heart of Pakistani feminism but may be relatable at the international level as feminisms all over the world have some common stakes (Rawat, 2014). Each set of placards starts with an Aurat March slogan, followed by either a slogan from the Haya March or the Mard March or both, paying attention to the ways they 'are made through one another' (Barad, 2007, p. 246).

Group 1:

Figure 5: *Our daughter, her choice* (Hanif, 2021).

Figure: 6: My body, my choice (Asher, 2020)

Figure 7: *My body, your choice will not work. Is it clear enough?* (Rahat, 2020).

Figure 8: *Long live the institution of marriage. Death to vulgarity* (Hussain, 2021).

Group 1 has 4 interrelated placards. The first 3 are from the Aurat March. An elderly couple supports their daughter to make her own choices (figure 5). The second is the in/famous Urdu rendering of the Western world's 'my body, my choice' slogan (figure 6). The 4th slogan is from the Haya March. Women are invited to the path of virtue by shouting 'death to vulgarity'. Given the history of honor killings, committed in response to 'vulgar' dressing, talking to a boyfriend on a cell phone, getting married of one's own choice, modelling etc. (Khan, 2018), this invitation is understandably ominous. The material-discursivity involves not just the words, but the practices that have an impact on the women. There is a veiled (pun intended) threat for women to be killed lest they break patriarchal norms by not choosing to get married (in the manner the society dictates).

Group 2:

Figure 9: *I am your life partner, not your maid* (Hanif, 2021)

Figure 10: *You cook the food, I will heat it myself* (Samirah, 2019).

These placards refer to the 'material' qualities that make a good woman in the Eastern definitions which are, incidentally, not very different from traditional Western gender roles (Becker, 1999) considering that there is a corresponding English expression, also. Being a good cook 'matters' in an Eastern (especially a Pakistani woman) woman's life. The saying in Urdu (and English) that the way to a man's heart goes through his stomach is taken seriously by the patriarchy. Eastern girls are supposed to be not just good cooks, but, excellent housekeepers, also. During the past few decades there has been an increase in women working outside their homes for a living and, consequently, they find it increasingly difficult as they must juggle household responsibilities with earning a livelihood. The placard (figure 10) held by the man though broadly subscribes to the house-keeping role of the women, can be read in a number of ways. Firstly, there seems to be a realization of modern women's new response/abilities, and, therefore, an offer of heating the food is given. Secondly, it seems that the Mard March organizers have realized that given the social media visibility, they do not want to be portrayed seem as misogynists when the same job can be done by the Haya March. It remains to be seen how they would behave if the Haya March were to discontinue their events. What is clear is that while being a good woman is 'mattered' through cooking, it is resisted through the same, also.

Group 3:

Figure 11: *A life of modesty is a beautiful part of faith* (Religious parties announce, 2020).

Figure 12: *I have a right to live in this world. I have a right to walk in this street. Girls just want to walk home safe* (These posters from this year warmed, 2022).

Figure 13: *My eyes, my choice* (CrickeyWorld, 2019)

As can be seen in figure 12, there are two girls with their heads covered. In figure 11, women are covered head-to-toe. The concept of Islamic notion of dressing up is under-going a change. There are many people who still hold to the view that women should be completely shrouded in veil when they step outside the home. Many others consider covering of the head as sufficient as the long veil or shroud is neither required nor practical. The issue of veil is not as simple or straight-forward as may seem to be. When Sara de Jong (2017) reminds us that veil is a 'contentious issue for feminists both in the global South and in the Global North' (p.171), she has to concede that it is seen both as a sign of 'oppression' and 'political agency' (p.172). Every woman associated with the Aurat March may not have the same opinion on veil, as can be seen in the above figures or assumed by the opponents. The placard by the man saying 'my eyes, my choice' is a twist on the 'my body, my choice'. Women want a right to use the public space safely whereas men consider it acceptable to stare at women who come out not fully veiled as veil is still a sign of modesty (figure 11) as perpetuated by the Haya March. Slogans like these implicitly allow women to be harassed as they are portrayed as loose women asking to be harassed. (Inayat, 2020; Aurat March cynics, 2019).

Discussion

When the Aurat March-ers demand rights, they are told that Islam grants 'full' rights to women and they do not have to quote Western constructs for it. It is obvious that when the Aurat March slogans/demands are countered by referring to Islam, it is with an intention to shrink space for negotiation, and this is the reason that most Pakistani women writers qualify their assertions about Islam. For instance, when Khan (2018, p.4) declares that her book 'is not a book about Islam. Rather, it is about the articulation of Islam in Pakistan's political context', she qualifies her statement by pointing out some inconsistencies in the stance of the religious parties that makes them more political and less religious. In Barad's term, this is the in/stability that a secular discussion tempered with religion produces.

While women in the West have to a certain extent convinced (refer to Becker above) their men that women are required to work side by side out the home, in many parts of India and Pakistan women are still preferred indoors. This is not a new phenomenon and a continuous struggle that started in the early 20th century continues to-date. In the undivided India (circa early 20th century), when women organizations exhorted women to shed off/come out of the purdah, the argument given was that there was no need for it as 'those social conditions that called for protection no longer existed' (Basu and Ray, 1990, p. 71). The ambivalence attached to purdah providing security is mentioned by

Patricia Jeffery (2000) who as a Western scholar is in a position to provide a perspective that may (not) help the Eastern women make sense of their situation. She is a woman and as such a feminist ally (Rawat, 2014), but also a Western one who may (not) be representing the colonial remnants. It is the same with using critical theory as a theoretical lens to de/construct a women movement event that problematizes notions of post/colonialism.

I bring in the discussion a Pakistani theorist who has written extensively on the political side of Islam and the role of women. Women associated with the Aurat March are repeatedly accused of pushing for a Western lifestyle through their demands. Amina Jamal (2013, p.207) theorizing on women belonging to Pakistan's oldest and largest Islamic party candidly equates '[m]iddle-class women of the Jamaat-e-Islami' with women anywhere in the world. She further claims, and I agree with her, that in today's world, it is not expected that women will remain un/moved by 'global discourses of women and development, nationalist conceptions of modernization'. Rather they will attempt to blend universalism with 'the culturalist solutions of Islamist ideologues' (Jamal, 2018, pp. 210-11). Insights like hers encourage those women who support patriarchy to rethink their stances.

Jamal's views are important not just from the perspective of (dis/re)locating Pakistani women in the global feminism which other Global South theorists (Roy, 2019; Iqbal, 2020, Zia, 2018) also suggest, but, they also point to the im/possibilities of using critical theory (Barad in this study) to re/configure events like the Aurat March that are multidimensional and contentious locally and internationally. The Aurat March cannot be labelled as a Western inspired thought just because it is about women's rights. Women who further patriarchy (figure 6b) admit that Islam grants rights to women; they just do not agree with how the Aurat March demands it. Conversely, the latter do not trust patriarchy to give them what they demand and therefore come to the roads. The coming on the roads and raising slogans is mis/attributed to the Western feminism and the allegations of furthering the West's agenda sets into motion. Feminism as a philosophy enjoys a universal status and recognition. Pakistani women have un/successfully localized and indigenized the movement, but this indigenization does not mean that the link with feminism as practiced elsewhere, notably, the West, is severed.

Conclusion

This study, through the lens of agential realism and diffractive readings, has illuminated the entangled and co-constitutive relationships between feminist activism in Pakistan and broader historical, colonial, and global feminist discourses. The analysis of slogans from the Aurat March reveals the interplay of indigenous feminist struggles with transnational influences, demonstrating how activism in Pakistan is both rooted in local histories and engaged in global feminist dialogues. As Srila Roy (2016) notes, feminist movements, despite their diverse contexts, exist within an interconnected world shaped by enduring power asymmetries and colonial legacies. In this regard, the Aurat March does not operate in isolation; rather, it re/worlds past narratives into present struggles, contesting hegemonic structures while negotiating its own unique feminist trajectory. As Barad (2014) asserts, 'there is no leaving the old behind'—feminist activism in Pakistan is deeply enmeshed with its historical, cultural, and political past, continually reshaping itself in response to contemporary challenges. This study underscores the need for ongoing critical engagement with these entanglements, recognizing both the constraints and possibilities that shape feminist resistance in the Pakistani context.

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