Mera Jism Kiski Marzi?[1]

An Ethnographic Understanding of the Aurat (Women's) March in Pakistan

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

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[1] Translation: "my body, whose choice?". Inspired by arguably the most controversial banner at the Aurat March in Pakistan which read "*mera jism, mera marzi*" (Translation: "my body, my choice")

Introduction

On May 8, 2018, the first Aurat (Women's) March was held in Karachi, Pakistan, where women came together on the streets and openly protested the harrassment, abuse, misogyny and discrimination they have faced for years. Since then, the march has been held annually on the same date in Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi, the 3 major cities of the country. Widely featured in the media, the march has attracted intense controversy over its appropriateness.

This movement has been divisive and polarizing in a manner very different from usual political issues in Pakistan, in that it brings to the forefront certain controversies regarding religious precedent that no political movement usually dares to question. While most people concede that women rights in Pakistan are in dire need of improvement, views on the march are radically opposed even within individual households, even among people of the same geographical regions, socioeconomic strata, and educational backgrounds. On the one hand liberal, modernized, leftist leaders of the march are unapologetically outspoken and unfiltered in their critique of the misogyny, and on the other hand, conservatives from all socioeconomic backgrounds, from lower to upper class, condemn the march for being indecent, un-Islamic, and too radical in its approach.

There has been work done on feminist theory in South Asia and the Middle East that is relevant to understanding the movement. Past major works on the lives of women in Pakistan and feminist struggles include Ayesha Shahid's *Silent Voices, Untold Stories: Women Domestic Workers in Pakistan and their Struggle for Empowerment* (2010), Nafisa Shah's *Honour Unmasked: Gender Violence, Law, and Power in Pakistan* (2016), Ammara Maqsood, *The New Pakistani Middle Class* (2017) and most recently Ayesha Khan's *The Women's*

Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy (2018). However, all these major works were published *before* the first Aurat March and thus do not analyze its purpose and effects. They give great historical context to the march, but no formal ethnographic work on the Aurat March in specific has been done as of yet.

Thus my research goal was to answer the following problem. Most people in Pakistan agree that women's rights ought to be improved. But the aurat march has caused radical polarization. What is the source of this disunity and contrast of views? What are the normative dilemmas and how can they possibly be resolved?

For this paper in specific, I will focus on the Problem of Representation, i.e. who has the right to speak for whom? Do people *outside* a given culture have the right to criticise it on feminist grounds? Is it the responsibility of those *within* a given culture who have visibility and the privilege to be seen that they take an approach conducive to those that do not have visibility? Or do they have the individual right to voice their personal concerns, even if it is not in line with the interests of the less privileged?

I will argue that in a post-colonial world, those *outside* a given culture are not in a legitimate place to criticise its practices on feminist grounds. However, women who function *within* a given culture *do* have the right to be radical and provocative in order to voice their own suffering, regardless of socio-economic class privilege, even if it's not the most effective way to help the less privileged.

Methodology

An Ethnographic Sensibility

While there is a considerable amount of work done in the past on feminist theory in South Asia, and some work on the feminist movements in Pakistan, to my knowledge, no formal study and analysis of the Aurat March has been conducted. Presumably, this lack of research has to do with how recent the March is. A lot of academics, intellectuals and the general public have commented widely on the march through social media, public forums and news platforms. However, no one has really conducted an ethnographic study to understand how people across socioeconomic strata understand and respond to the March.

Herzog and Zacka have made an argument for the value of ethnographic research in normative reflection, especially in the context of political theory. They point out five distinct ways in which ethnographic data can contribute to normative reflection: (768)

1. Epistemic: uncovering the nature of situated normative demands
2. Diagnostic: diagnosing obstacles encountered when responding to these demands
3. Evaluative: evaluating practices and institutions against a given set of values
4. Valuational: probing, questioning and refining our understanding of values
5. Ontological: uncovering underlying social ontologies

My larger aim was to use my data for insights along all 5 of these dimensions. However, as Anatol Lieven puts it, Pakistan is a hard country. With a population of above 200 million, a struggling economy, a corrupt status quo, a large number of conflicting religious and ethnic identities, a rich but troubled history, and an extremely volatile political environment, any comprehensive understanding of a socio-political movement in

Pakistan requires rigorous, indepth, long-term research into the intricate interplay of all these factors. This paper is only a first tiny step in that process, and I plan to continue working on this for the next year. However, since I have only done a preliminary analysis of the interviews and literature, and have a long way to go, I don't feel like I'm in a position to give an opinion from an ontological or diagnostic point of view. An ontological analysis requires a deep understanding of the social ontologies that "form the basis on which… institutions and values are built." (776) This is an on-going process for me, but cannot possibly be covered in the scope of this paper. A diagnostic analysis requires a discernment of "the obstacles that individuals encounter when trying to live and act morally." (768) Based on my observations so far, poverty and lack of financial empowerment appear to be the primary obstacle for many women in fighting for their rights. Education and religion also seem to play a significant role. I plan to cover an analysis of these obstacles in a future paper, which will be more of an anthropological description than a normative reflection.

Herzog and Zacka use the term "perspectival duality" to describe how ethnographic research involves looking at a social reality from two views, the subjects of the study and that of the researcher herself. Often, these views do not perfectly line up, and in both their disparity and agreement, they reveal a nuance that is otherwise tricky to capture. As a woman who has grown up in Pakistan for most of my life, I felt that me being the ethnographic inquirer would help create nuance in this way. Even though I tried to stay as objective as possible in my interview process, I am sure there is some inevitable bias that seeped through. But in an ethnographic study, even this bias and the insider view that I have in fact ends up contributing to rather than taking away from the inquiry.

The structure of the paper will be as follows: I shall begin with a brief evaluative description of The Problem of Representation, i.e. what practical phenomena it refers to and an *epistemic* reflection on the objection, i.e. based on my interviews, whether or not people find this criticism compelling. After this, I will move onto the main focus of this paper, the valuational analysis. That is, in the context of the epistemic reflection, do I find the objection compelling or not. For this valuational section, I will first present historical context for The Problem of Representation. Then I will state my claim along with its preliminary defense. I will then consider objections to my claim based on some of the interviews I conducted. I will then use the ethnographic data I collected from other interviews to respond to these objections. Finally, I will suggest the many future directions in which this project can potentially progress.

Data

The ethnographic data I collected consists of 26 interviews that I personally conducted, each of which were 1 - 1.5 hours each. These interviews were fully confidential, and while using data from them in this paper, I will identify the subjects with pseudonyms to uphold their confidentiality. My interviewees spanned over different gender identities, including males, females and members of the transgender communy. Almost all the subjects were in the range of 20 to 40 year olds. I had initially planned to interview people from all age groups, but I decided to leave the cross-generational analysis for the next step. An important goal for me was to include subjects from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. My data pool consisted of subjects from each of the three socioeconomic groups I defined as follows:

- Lower (socioeconomic) class - monthly household income of less than Rs.50k, i.e. ~$350
- Middle (socioeconomic) class - monthly household income between Rs.50k - Rs.3 lac, i.e. ~ $350 - $2000)
- Upper (socioeconomic) class - monthly household income greater than Rs. 3 lac, i.e. ~ $2000

Evaluative and Epistemic Analysis

I shall begin with an evaluative description of the Problem of Representation, i.e. what practical phenomena it refers to and why, given the context, it is the case that representation might not be considered ideal.

One of the common criticisms of the Aurat March that came up during my interviews was that it predominantly has upper-middle and upper class participants and organizers. As such, they are not really looking after the interests of the less privileged women with the "real problems." Raheel (pseudonym for Subject 007), who is a 23 year old male, recently graduated from one of the top universities in Pakistan, and from the upper-middle class said, *"The fact that a certain class of women more or less are in those positions of authority, they do have the responsibility that the first and foremost thing they do is empower other women from other positions... represent different/diverse audiences. To an extent that is being done, but perhaps not enough."*

Several other interviewees expressed the same concern. The most disadvantaged women are those from the lower socioeconomic class. However, the current organizers and participants are a) not really from that socioeconomic class so are not really fighting for them while claiming to be speaking on their behalf and b) are in fact *harming* women from lower socioeconomic class by how radical their approach is, diverting attention from the pressing problems faced by the 'truly' disadvantaged women.

I now move onto an *epistemic* reflection on the Problem of Representation, i.e. based on my interviews, whether or not people find this criticism compelling. There is very obvious disagreement on whether or not the objections raised by opponents of the Aurat March with regards to the Problem of Representation. Sarah (pseudonym for Subject 001)

is a 32 year old woman from the upper middle class, who grew up in Islamabad, has received her PhD from the US and is currently working as a postdoc in Michigan. In response to the objection of insufficient and ineffective representation, Sarah said the following. *"I would say this argument sort of comes from people who are trying to blame everything on the organizers of the aurat march… Aurat march organizers have never claimed that this will solve all your issues. This is just one attempt to bring attention to these issues. But of course the structural problems in Pakistan are huge and have a lot of aspects...".* Raheel (Subject 007) is slightly more sympathetic to this objection. He says, *"perhaps the concern is that there are 'more fundamental problems' that we need to address first. For the large part of the population they are not concerned with who is cooking the food, they are concerned with issues like honor killings, marital rape, child marriage etc."* He suggests that perhaps the solution is *"to target your approach, to say let's focus on specific problems first."*

In general, those sympathetic to the objection based on representation point out that the current participants are radicalizing the discourse at the expense of the less privileged. They are diverting attention away from those who are suffering the most and in doing so they are abusing their class privilege.

I present my view in response to the Problem of Representation in the next section.

Valuational Analysis

This section is the main focus of this paper - my normative response to the Problem of Representation. I begin with some scholarly context of this problem and a focus on the historical precedent set by feminist movements in the Middle East. I will then present my claim in response to the PoR. Next, I consider the common objections I came across during my interviews, and I will use data from the interviews to respond to these objections.

Historical and Scholarly Context

At the global level the Problem of Representation is captured in the debate between multiculturalism and imperialism. In *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women,* Susan Okin claims that multiculturalism is in conflict with secular liberal feminism because it allows for cultures to persist even when they have anti-feminist practices. On the other hand, in *Against Universals: The Dialects of (Women's) Human Rights and Human Capabilities*, Lila Abu Lughod argues that this is a very narrow view of culture, that women rights and human rights as defined by liberal feminists are based on ideas formulated by a predominantly English-speaking, western, secular, universalistic group of people. She claims that such universalism is problematic because it promotes the myth of modernity as the ideal state rather than recognizing it for what it is: an imperialistic endeavor and a reminder of the global imbalance of power in the post-colonial world. Such ideals allow people from dominant cultures like Okin to take as fact the normative assumptions made within western, secular liberalism.

The interesting thing about the case of Pakistan is that the argument between multiculturalism and liberal feminism is not just between members of two different cultures, as it is in the case of Okin versus Abu Lughod. In fact the debate is *within* a single

culture. The question being raised is not whether the dominant culture should allow for or interfere with the practices of minority cultures, but the inevitable influence of the dominant culture (liberal feminism) on members of the "minority" culture (specifically women from higher socio economic backgrounds who are relatively exposed to the west) has caused an *intra*-cultural debate on what cultural practices are right or wrong.

Sarah (Subject 001) identifies this as a major reason for the controversy surrounding the Aurat March. *"One of the reasons for the polarization caused by the march is this "outsider" mentality that people have, this belief that such ideas of women rights are from the west... there's a natural aversion that people have to "western ideas" that challenge the status quo that we have been living with for decades, and it's an easy criticism to make, to say this is not a part of us this is just the gora (white) ideas..."*

This intra-cultural debate has been historically pervasive in the post-colonial world. There are some notable common themes across historical feminist movements in the Middle East, including those in Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Morocco. These include the problem of post-colonial nation-building, the issue of class politics in the face of financial divides and the contention between secular feminism and Islam.

In most of these Middle Eastern feminist movements, the question of who gets to speak for whom within a given cultural context is a recurrent theme. Consider the example of Egypt, where class politics often caused controversies in public feminist discourse. I consider 2 prominent figures below, Qasim Amin and Huda Shara'awi, both criticised for their upper class background.

Qasim Amin was born into a wealthy aristocratic family in Egypt, and was educated in heavily Europeanized institutions. In *The Liberation of Women*, he speaks of the Western

society as civilized and superior and Egyptian society as “ignorant, barbaric” (4) and stagnant. Amin considers the Western women's freedom as the ideal, something that the Egyptian society ought to strive towards as well. “Women in all these (Western) societies have felt that they deserve their independence, and are searching for the means to achieve it.” (7)

Amin is a controversial figure in Middle Eastern feminist history. He has been criticised for idealizing European society. The writings are mostly directed towards an aristocratic audience, which critics take as a sign of his disconnection with the experiences of the common man.

Huda Shara’awi, an Egyptian upper class woman, founded and led the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in the first half of the 20th century, and remained a prominent leader until her death in 1947.

In “*Women and Gender in Islam*”, Leila Ahmed criticizes both Qasim Amin and Huda Shara’awi for being upper class “elites” influenced by Western values trying to impose them onto Egypt threatening the native Arab identity.

Talking about Shara’awi’s unveiling, Ahmed points out that Shara’awi’s “perspective was informed by a valorization of Western ways as more advanced and more "civilized" than native ways.” (178) Ahmed thought that Shara’awi gives undue credit to her exposure to Western ideas as the source of her meaningfully feminist acts. For example, Ahmed points out that the most daring act of Shara’awi’s, leaving a forced underage marriage, was before Shara’awi had any exposure to the Western ideas that she later credits. About Amin, Leila Ahmed accuses him of internalizing “notions of the innate superiority of the European over the native'' which she terms as “the colonization of consciousness”. (179)

Coming to Pakistan in specific, the most recent comprehensive work on the feminist movement in Pakistan done by Ayesha Khan, *The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy* focused on interviews from upper-middle and middle-class women involved in the movement and the archives of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) in Pakistan. Khan traces the history of the women's movement in Pakistan, from pre-Partition times, through the Islamisation under Zia-ul-Haq, and the subsequent mobilization of women's activists to undo the effect of oppressive policies introduced, and ending on the current state of affairs. This historical account of the women's movement in Pakistan reveals that it has mostly been led by the elites.

My Normative Claim

My normative claim in response to the Problem of Representation is as follows. In a post-colonial world, those *outside* a given culture are not in a legitimate place to criticise its practices on feminist grounds. However, women who function *within* a given culture *do* have the right to be radical and provocative in order to voice their own suffering, regardless of socio-economic class privilege, even if it's not the most effective way to help the less privileged.

There is an important caveat to notice here. The Problem of Representation consists of two kinds of disagreements: 1) What is morally right? 2) What is effective? The latter is a much longer debate, and requires significantly more research. What is morally justified is a slightly different question though, and this is the one I am addressing here.

In *Against Universals: The Dialects of (Women's) Human Rights and Human Capabilities*, Lila Abu-Lughod writes against a "universal" notion of human rights and by

extension, a universal notion of women's rights. Her main argument is that the dominant discourse in feminist theory is informed by a western, secular, liberal framework and while it claims to be an objective standard that ought to be implied globally, this "language of universality is actually just a dialect". (76) She begins her reasoning by pointing out that the notion of universal women's rights is rooted in the UNDHR and CEDAW, which were both produced in an inherently politically unequal and colonial world, drafted in an "English-speaking, largely secular, universalistic, law-governed culture, organized around the formal equality of nations and their economic and political inequality." (76) Criticizing the universalistic discourse perpetuated by thinkers like Susan Okin and Sally Engle Merry, Abu-Lughod instead proposes an approach of *kinship* and *tactical humanism* which she defines as "a philosophy that could unite us across cultures, languages, religions, and their political manipulations." (74-75)

There are parts of Abu-Lughod's argument that I find very compelling. I agree that, in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women,* Okin talks with an implicit tone of Western superiority, "melodramatically" using examples of child marriage, polygamy, and honor killings to prove the inferiority of being 'behind' Western liberal cultures. I think Okin's language and her position as a white American woman claiming to speak for the plight of the inferior cultures she has never really experienced herself are slightly irksome for sure. I found Abu-Lughod's "historical/anthropological case" against such universalism very strong and persuasive. This use of culture to explain women subordination in the global south is a tool western liberal feminists evoke in order to "obscure the degree to which many women's problems around the world are rooted in forces beyond their individual

cultures or communities", particularly the "international structures of inequality" that these western liberals themselves are somewhat responsible for. (82)

However, there are certain parts of Abu-Lughod's argument that I do disagree with. While it's true that hearing these American women use the women in the global south as "victim subjects" is frustrating, I do think that some critiques Abu-Lughod rejects are made by women who *do* in fact come from within those cultures and have experienced it from the inside.

Abu-Lughod conflates culture and religion in her writing. In my experience, these are two very different things. I do think that there are certain aspects of religion that are, objectively, obstacles to women's emancipation. To be extra clear, I am talking about Islam, the religion I come from since I don't feel like I am in a position to comment on other religions.

In the beginning of her piece, Abu Lughod gives a personal account of her relationship to the Haj, the head of the Bedouin tribe that she lived with for two years while conducting her anthropological research. She describes the Haj as a kind, righteous, caring man, incredibly good at heart, respected and loved, who would go above and beyond to sacrifice his comfort for his loved ones. But my criticism of polygamy, of the sexist gender roles in the nuclear family, and other patriarchal notions perpetuated in such a community is not an attack on the kindness or goodwill of people like the Haj, it's not a claim that all men who participate in the patriarchy are terrible men. A lot of Pakistani men in my life are kind-hearted, righteous, amazing human beings. But that does not mean that the patriarchal system we function under is not inherently problematic and ought to be

changed. Our culture of kinship is precious and ought to be preserved, but that does not mean we need to defend the aspects of it that are problematic, like polygamy and demarcated gender roles, and the male-dominant family structure. In recounting the story of the Haj, Abu-Lughod tries to defend both aspects, and while that may be helpful to explain to people like Okin why their arguments of universality and cultural imperialism are faulty, this approach trivializes the real issues at the heart of our patriarchy by flowering it up with sentimentality about the character and kindness of an admirable man.

Similarly, in *"Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival"*, Saba Mahmood uses her ethnographic study of the women's mosque movement in Egypt to disentangle the notion of self-fulfillment from that of individual autonomy - two ideas that have been integrally linked and often conflated in liberal feminist discourse.

She does so by distinguishing between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom, she defines as "the absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action" (207) Positive freedom, on the other hand, is "the capacity to realize an autonomous will, one generally fashioned in accord with the dictates of 'universal reason' or 'self-interest'." (207)

This reading brings to light two distinct kinds of opposition to western liberal feminist discourse. The first is the post-structuralist feminist view, which attempts to "expand the notion of self-realization/self-fulfillment", (208) by pointing out that certain practices in non-western/ non-liberal socio-cultural contexts are expressions of self-guided choice and hence individual autonomy is in fact elevated by such practices, contrary to

western-liberal perception. This view attempts to give a new narrative to feminist movements in the Middle East, by trying to break down the assumptions made by white liberal feminists like Susan Okin and imposed on to other places and cultures.

Saba Mahmood doesn't oppose or invalidate that view, but she repeatedly tries to set herself apart from this post-structuralist narrative and tries to go a step further by "uncoupling both the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will, as well as agency from the progressive goal of emancipatory politics." (208) She emphasizes that she is arguing for something different than the post-structuralist feminist view, because "the normative subject of poststructuralist feminist theory remains a liberatory one, her agency largely conceptualized in terms of resistance to social norms." (208) Her goal is to reconceptualize women's agency and self-fulfillment such that it is no longer intrinsically tied to subversion of existing societal norms.

For this purpose, she uses her ethnographic work on the women's mosque movement in Egypt. She takes the example of these women who are not even asking for or claiming to be fighting for their 'rights' or 'emancipation'. Rather, they're doing something completely different that they *want* to do for personal reasons and aspirations. And what they are doing, in this specific case promoting piety and some forms of submissiveness, we have often included in our criticism of these kinds of movements by saying that women engaging in such actions constitutes their suppression. Instead, Mahmood claims, we ought to realize that these are women who *want* to do these things for reasons entirely separate from the familiar goals of emancipatory feminist politics. This is a form of self-realization

for them that does *not* consist of subversion of, but rather submission to, existing societal norms. And that's why it raises the question of women's agency.

While I support the post structuralist feminist view, I do not agree with the second additional step Mahmood takes, especially because she uses the women's mosque movement as an example, a movement with aim of promoting 'piety' and 'sabr' (patience) in society.

In a recent tweet, Nida Kirmani, a Professor of Sociology at Lahore University of Management Sciences and a leading figure in the Aurat March in Pakistan said the following:

> *"One of the most insidious ways of reproducing patriarchy is the narrative of 'sabr'. Praising women who are saabir, who suffer silently—seeing this as the highest virtue—is a means of giving other women & girls the message that they must stay in their places no matter what."*[2]

If women from Western liberal cultures point towards a piety movement promoting ideas of *sabr* and criticise it for being anti-feminist, then yes, that is problematic because they are imposing their imperialist standards of what feminism ought to look like on another socio-cultural context that is far-removed from their own experience. However, a woman like Nida Kirmani who has to exist *within* this culture and thus is being personally affected by this piety movement has every right to criticise it on feminist grounds.

There is a crucial difference between a woman desiring to wear a hijab to satisfy her personal, internal aspirations and another woman desiring to go out in society and dictate

[2] Source: <https://twitter.com/NidaKirmani/status/1392946202438770691>

that women in this society *ought* to wear a hijab, because this is what is pious and righteous. The latter is imposing an ideal on women and limiting their agency.

We argue a lot about the impositions of Western definitions of feminism on to Muslim women. But I think the experiences of Muslim women within those communities that are painful ought to be remembered, and are slightly dismissed by the way Mahmood tries to protect the women's mosque movement.

And thus I come to my main claim: An individual who experiences gender-based violence is wronged, irrespective of socio-economic class. Like SaraAhmed points out, this feeling of being wronged is experienced as intense overwhelming emotion which is what often pushes individuals to engage in radical feminist movements. Those who suffer are morally justified in expressing their emotional, sensational experience of being wronged, regardless of their socioeconomic background..

In *Feminism is Sensational,* Sara Ahmed says that *"finding feminism can be empowering as it is a way of reinhabiting the past. It is personal. There is no question: it is personal. The personal is structural."* (30) In agreement with Sara Ahmed, I feel that often those who choose to mostly rigorously participate in the feminist struggle are the ones who have personally experienced gender-based violence and successly identified it as a societal problem. Ahmed notes, *"an individual man who violates you is given permission: that is structure. His violence is justified as natural and inevitable: that is structure."* (30)

Similarly, in *Love and knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology*, Alison Jaggar draws attention to the role of emotion in developing a feminist consciousness. She says, *"only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger, or fear may we*

bring to consciousness our 'gut-level' awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice or danger." (181)

I support Ahmed and Jaggar's view that feminist consciousness is intrinsically tied to emotion, and often serves as an outlet for the emotional, personal experience of gender-based violence. Thus, my claim is that an individual who has personally faced gender-based violence has the right to the expression of this injustice in the form of a radical feminist consciousness. That is, it is morally justified for women who suffer to be reactive to the oppression they personally experience, without considerations of socioeconomic class.

Objections to My Claim

There are several objections to my claim that I foresee based on my interviews. These can be roughly grouped into the following categories.

1. The privileged women are not addressing the "real issues" - **irrelevant**
2. These women are radicalizing the discourse at the expense of the less privileged - **irresponsible**
3. They are alienating the lower class - **exclusive**
4. These westernized, upper class women are spreading 'vulgarity and unIslamic values' in society, they are simply white-washed and advancing a foreign agenda - **indecent**

My Response to the Objections

I will respond to these objections in 2 steps, firstly using arguments based on my own reasoning and secondly supporting it with an ethnographic sensibility using data from the interviews.

My first line of defense is to present arguments based on my reasoning. I noticed that the people who raise this concern are themselves from the privileged class, i.e. nobody really bothers asking the lower socioeconomic class what they think, even those who criticise the Aurat March participants for not paying attention to the lower class.

Thus, this objection, I believe, is simply an ad hominem fallacy. It attempts to discredit the sensational experience of women based on class rather than recognizing the intense trauma and emotions caused by the violence prevalent in the society against women across all socioeconomic backgrounds. To support this with empirical counter examples, almost every single woman from the upper and middle socioeconomic class I interviewed, expressed something severely problematic that had happened to them by virtue of being a woman. Harassment on the streets was just a given for everyone. And then other things like childhood abuse, sexual violence in relationships, domestic abuse, etc. added on top of that.. Even women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds believed that upper class women also face significant struggles and trauma. Amina (pseudonym for Subject 016) is a 29 year old woman from a lower socioeconomic background., and only educated till the 7th grade. She seemed to see that women in Pakistan, regardless of socioeconomic class, suffer immensely. She said *"you see, poor women have problems but rich women have problems too. You know, even if a woman is super rich, she may not look like*

it but maybe on the inside she is terribly oppressed because of which she also has to bear with everything but she doesn't let anyone see it and says I'm okay to everyone."

My second line of defense is based on ethnographic sensibility. Specifically, based on my interviews, I noticed that how "radically feminist" someone's views were had much more to do with their own personal experience with sexual violence rather than what socioeconomic class or educational background they were from. Of course, this is just my preliminary judgment based on limited analysis so far. But I did see an obvious difference between the conviction of those who were suffering themselves, versus those who were far removed from the more violent experiences they had only "theoretically" heard of.

TRIGGER WARNING - MARITAL RAPE, ABUSE, SEXUAL VIOLENCE

I will use two examples to show this. First, consider the question of marital rape, which is very controversial since Islamic law does not explicitly recognize marital rape and thus many have argued that there is not such thing. The growing conversation around consent is one of the most polarizing aspects of the Aurat March debate, the slogan "*mera jism, meri marzi*" (my body, my choice) being arguably the most controversial posters at the march. Many associate this 'overly radical' discourse to be an elite, upper class women agenda which the lower class women would (presumably) be opposed to.

Zainab (pseudonym for subject 003) is a 30 years old, married women who recognized herself as from the upper middle class. She has completed her Masters and is planning to pursue a PhD next. She is clearly in a healthy, happy marriage, where her husband is extremely caring and considerate. She is one of the critics of the Aurat March,

and despite being very well educated and from a higher socioeconomic background, on the question of marital rape, she denied that there is such a thing. Zainab defended her claim as follows:

> *"You see, for the nikkah (marriage contract) you sign a paper… The nikkah is not a casual thing, your parents sit you down and ask you, they ask your permission that if you sign this now you are responsible for your own wellbeing. Then after signing this you are giving this right to the man, your husband, after that if he wants to engage in any kind of activity with you then there's nothing wrong with it. Then if the woman denies him his right, that is in fact a sin."*

Fatima (pseudonym for Subject 023) is a 22 years old, married women from an extremely poor socioeconomic background. The monthly household income is Rs. 10k (~$70) for a house of 4. She is only educated till the 1st grade. She is in an abusive marriage with a controlling, violent husband. She describes her tragic experience of sexual violence as follows:

> *"I get angry but he still forces me (to have sex)... Yes it makes me feel bad, I get so angry I start wishing I could kill him or myself, when I don't feel like (having sex) but he still forces me then I don't feel like doing anything anymore. And then I have to hear things like if I can't touch you then should I go out and find someone?" She mentions that she has tried seeking support but everyone around her shuts her down. "Once my mother-in-law also told me that keep your husband satisfied, don't let him go outside... if he goes outside then it must be the wife's fault for not letting him do something (have sexual relations)."*

Fatima has never been told through some book she read or movie she watched that consent is important. She has never even heard the word marital rape. But she knows that she is being wronged, because she has personally experienced the violence. As Sara Ahmed says, this violence is sensational. Even when you lack the vocabulary to describe it, it still exists in your skin, in your memory. And you know that it is wrong even if you don't have the language or consciousness to articulate it.

Similarly, within the lower socioeconomic class there is another woman named Tahira (pseudonym used for Subject 016). She is 29 years old, married and Christian. Her monthly household income before the pandemic used to be Rs. 30k (~$200) before the pandemic, but ever since the lockdowns have started her husband's shoe repair business is not running well. So for the past year, the monthly household income has been Rs. 10k (~$70). She has only been educated till the 7th grade. Tahira is in an abusive marriage with an extremely controlling husband. She had to sneak away from her house to meet me for the interview because her husband had forbidden her from talking to me when he heard someone was conducting interviews about women's rights in that neighborhood. Tahira was very obviously unhappy in her marriage, she felt stuck but she knew there was no escaping it.because there is no idea of divorce in her religion. The anger and frustration was evident in her voice as she talked to me. I include her answers to some of my questions below.

Q. Do you think the approach of the Aurat March is too provocative and radical?

> *"The world works on aggression, it's not like you could talk politely, politely no one will listen. Only anger will make them listen. So it's good, however it is happening it's*

good… We can't do this ourselves so if they voice our frustrations and bitterness we will like it as well."

Q. Do you feel dissatisfied that these rich elite women are claiming to speak on behalf of women like you?

"No they should speak up for sure, it's possible that maybe through them our concerns will be heard as well. That's why they should continue to speak up, because they have the money to do everything, and us poor ones without the means will get benefited as well…"

Q. Do you think they are "spreading vulgarity" and engaging in indecent behaviour?

"No, no, that's not true. Even if these women don't say anything, vulgar things are happening anyway, so it's okay if they are speaking, speaking for their rights so they should fight. What's vulgar about that?"

Tahira's responses reveal that despite her being uneducated, from a lower socioeconomic background and unexposed to western ideas, she does not agree with the objections raised by opponents of the Aurat March who claim that women like her are harmed rather than advantaged by the March.

I want to stress that not all women from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds that I interviewed shared Tahira's views. However, the ones who were in the most abusive relationships and had personally experienced severe sexual violence and trauma were surprisingly on board with the ideals of the March, similar to Tahira. Others who were in somewhat healthy relationships like Zainab were the ones very sympathetic to the objections raised by critics of the March. Again, this is my preliminary judgment based on the interviews I conducted, and requires much more thorough exploration. But my

observations so far do support Sara Ahmed's idea that feminism is personal and sensational.

Conclusion

Based on the interviews I conducted, personal history and experience appears to have a more significant role in a person's inclination to support the Aurat March than their socioeconomic class or level of education. I use this ethnographic sensibility and my normative views on the scholarly debate on the Problem of Representation to conclude that the participants of the Aurat March are morally justified in voicing their own suffering using the radical, provocative approach they are currently taking, and considerations of class privilege do not make their actions morally dubious. I stress, once again, that this is very preliminary work and requires rigorous further exploration.

The strongest, most certain takeaway I have from this project is on the importance of an ethnographic sensibility as a method in study of moral and political theory. In answering such normative questions, we ought to conduct empirical, ethnographic research because armchair moral philosophy is presumptuous when making claims about real ongoing subjective experiences. People claiming to represent ideas of underprivileged without ever really talking to them and thoroughly understanding views is hypocritical. However, people *criticizing* others for acting in a way not conducive to the interests of the underprivileged is *also* hypocritical.

Future Directions

Some of the salient themes that came up in the interviews, but I did not address in the context of this paper include the following.

- The appeal to religion to both discredit and legitimize the women's movement. A cross-generational analysis of the effects of Zia ul Haq's Islamisation during 70s-80s.
- Pakistan's family laws - the Sharia versus Tribal justice
- The role of the transgender community - concerns about visibility and safety.
- In-fighting amongst the Aurat March organizers.
- The use of language in the Aurat March - A Discourse of ally-ship/solidarity versus retaliation.
- The themes of colonialism, nationalism and imperialism.
- The nature of political movements and public demonstrations in general.

The interviews I conducted as part of this research were rich with emotion, conflict, contradictions and questions I had not at all anticipated. This paper has barely scratched the surface of the ideas that came up. I plan to continue this work over the summer, conducting more interviews and gaining deeper insight into the complex interplay of religion, education, post-colonial national identity, economic instability and a growing feminist consciousness.

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