DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PAKISTAN MEDIA COVERAGE DURING “AURAT MARCH” 2022: A FEMINIST APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate and examine the image and representation of women in the Pakistani media, focusing on prejudice, portrayal, and their roles within society. Despite the emergence of modern feminism and social progress, Pakistani women continue to face oppression. Recognizing the influential power of the media, this research aims to examine its potential to bring about social change when approached with sincerity, as it possesses the ability to shape public opinions and attitudes. To accomplish this, a qualitative research approach has been adopted. The study involves the collection and analysis of data from specific talk shows aired on various news channels within the Pakistani media landscape. By focusing on these talk shows, the research seeks to explore the media’s role in presenting and discussing key aspects of the Aurat March, a women's rights movement in Pakistan. The results show that the problem arises from the misunderstood discourse related to the movement. Oftentimes, it was related to culturally insensitive content about aurat march by media covering the other side of the slogan which further fueled the controversial religious rhetoric of the nation. This phenomenon implies that media platforms can either perpetuate or challenge prevailing prejudices and stereotypes.

Keywords: Pakistani media, aurat march, feminism, agenda setting

INTRODUCTION

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Over the past few years, the feminist movement in Pakistan has seen a resurgence in its efforts, with a growing presence in all segments of the country's society. The movement has undergone a transformation from a reform-oriented initiative in the 1980s to a more secular agenda in the 1990s, placing greater emphasis on legal issues. There has been a natural transition from online calls against sexual harassment to mass street protests. Debuting in cities across the country in 2018, it has become a cultural icon for supporters and critics alike (Saigol and Chaudhry 2020, AS Zia 2020a). But, the wave of feminism in Pakistan that emerged in the form of the Aurat March was started by women collectives in parallel to #Me too movement on international women’s day. The first march was held on March 8, 2018 in Karachi. Marches were organized in 2019 by group of individual women known as “Hum Aurtein” (We the women, a women’s collective) in Lahore and in its annual manifesto, Karachi addressed a diverse array of issues, spanning from domestic violence and children's rights to minority rights, economic inequality, institutional reform, accountability, environmental justice, health care, gender inclusivity, and peace building. Aurat march 2022 speaks up about “Security, Wages and Peace”.

Aurat March’s call is not only about institutional reform, but also about cultural change towards a peaceful and non-violent society. The concept of feminism in Pakistan and the narrative surrounding it has always been controversial. Media is considered the most important part of any society. It works as a bridge between people and state. Having great power, media uses text and language to manipulate the audience which focuses on Agenda setting theory of masss communication which was introduced in 1972. This theory describes media as main entity that selects what news stories to report. This article revolves around the aurat march 2022 and explains how narratives are formed and how media narratives relate to the aurat march manifesto.

This study aims are: 1) To highlight the negative role of media during aurat march 2022 that how media is failed to convey the right message of women being part of Aurat March; and 2) To investigate rights of women and how feminism is framed through media in Pakistan.

This research paper is guided by the following research questios: 1) How is annual aurat march framed in Pakistani media? 2) How does this coverage tell us about the role of media in the perception of
feminism? and 3) How does media play role in highlighting the rights of women?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Humaira Ameer in her article “Propoganda on social media: An analysis of the aurat march compaign on Facebook” rightly asserts that on Facebook people who were in the favour of aurat march, they were commenting positively. But those who were against aurat match, they spread negative aspects only. On Facebook a video was uploaded in which Shahzaib khanzada was saying that after even three days of aurat march people were never talking about women rights and their oppression In the country, people were spreading false views against aurat march. This video got a lot of views.

Unlike other talksows, there was only one prime time talk show: “Aaj Shahzaib Khanzada kay saath” (uploaded on YouTube 9th March 2021) the anchor Shahzaib khanzada instead of having false views and instead of mispresting the slogans and playcards which were held by women being part of aurat march, religious minister Noor Ul Haq Qadri was invited for an interview. In the show all the slogans were voiced after taking permission from the participants of this march perhaps in the name of avoiding misinformation or showing journalist ethics. Other programs covered no public view and there was no panel discussions (Mahnoor Saleem and Neha Nisar 2022).

The two most famous talkshows which heavily discussed Aurat March on Samaa Tv were “7 se 8” hosted by Kiran Naz and “News Beat” hosted by lawyer Ehtasham Amirudin. Some shows widely discussed Aurat March and some were focusing on subject.

Applying a critical discourse analysis lens, the 11 talk shows featured on Bol News' official YouTube channel were analyzed. One of the shows, "Meri Jang with Usman Ghazi," which aired in 2019 and 2020, was found to exhibit a biased approach towards conflict resolution, as it only focused on the critical and controversial aspects of the Aurat March. Despite inviting activists in support of the march, neither the Aurat March Manifesto nor its plan were read or discussed by the organizers or other participants during the show. Instead, the anchor imposed questions such as whether women participating in the march had exceeded cultural limits. Moreover, the use of literal translations on placards used in the show generated criticism.
Ahmad Rameez Ul Huda and Roshan Amber Ali (2015) stated about the portrayal of women in Pakistani media that women are still the victims and are particularly vulnerable to bullying in the workplace. Despite their physical and biological differences, women tend to retain the same level of knowledge and ability as men. But he was not guaranteed a well-deserved position at all, and even hopelessly. They are considered inferior and useless because of the social taboos associated with them. Thus, there is a clear violation of the provisions of the Constitution of Pakistan. The media is the most powerful and unprecedented means of shaping and forming opinions these days. The portrayal of women in the media gives the impression that men are more worthy, self-confident, and hardworking than women. Often, lighter matters such as fashion, culture, and housework were left to women, while more serious matters, such as law, crime, robbery, economics, and suburban construction, were left to men. From this follows the basic female impression of the weak field.

In Bol News headlines on March 6,2022 (2:14 pm) an anchor asked a question about the achievement of their target from a woman who was the part of Aurat march by addressing her as the daughter of her father. But she replied “Pehli tou aap nay jis trha mera taaruf krwaya usi mein hamura mutaliba chupa hua hai. Baishk main apny baap ki beti hun aur barha fakhar hai kay main unki beti hun. Lekin main sirf kisi beti, bhai ya biwi ki hasiyat sy is smaaj mein exist nhai karti. Main khud ak jeeti jagti insan hun, main ak teacher hun, ak lecturer hun.” (So our request is hidden in the message you sent to me. Certainly, I am my father’s daughter and I am very proud to be his daughter. But I do not exist in this sense with the senses of a daughter, brother or wife. I myself am a living person, I am a teacher, a lecturer.) These words show that how much they were demanding about their own identity.

From News, show business, politics or modelling everything contains a tinge of controversy when it comes to women. In Pakistan, media is influenced by certain cultural and political groups, with no specific policies and procedures for women empowerment and gender insensitivity” (Huda & Ali, 2015). Emaan Lakhani in “Pakistan’s Women’s March becomes another example of mainstream media’s agenda setting to promote patriarchy” states that male journalists believe that women are submissive and men are superior to them. She even stated that in Pakistan not men are the enemies of women, but they are also women and the media. She was extremely in the favour of
aurat march. According to her, aurat march was a peaceful campaign that highlighted the issues and problems faced by women in Pakistan.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper follows a qualitative method to investigate the portrayal of Aurat March in Pakistan’s leading news outlets in terms of feminism. I collected key data from the official YouTube websites of several news channels. This study follows Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw’s theory of Agenda setting of mass communication. For this study, I collected a random sample of prime time news talk shows 2022 from Samaa TV, Bol News, Geo News from the channel’s official YouTube portal until March 2022 and data were analyzed in quantitative way.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**Results**

In the realm of media and public discourse, agenda setting theory plays a significant role in shaping public opinions and perceptions. This theory suggests that the media, through its selective coverage, can prioritize certain topics and issues, influencing what the public considers important. In the context of the Aurat March in Pakistan, a study was conducted to examine the agenda setting of this movement by Pakistani media. The study analyzed the coverage and discussions in popular talk shows aired on news channels, including Geo News, Bol News, and Samaa TV. The table below present’s key information such as the news channels’ subscriber counts, talk show titles, airing dates, and the number of views on their corresponding YouTube videos. This data provides valuable insights into the level of engagement and viewership surrounding these talk shows, offering a glimpse into the media's role in shaping public perceptions of the Aurat March.

One of the most popular showed “Aaj Shahzaib khanzada kay saath” was hosted by famous host Shahzaib khanzada in which Minister of Religious l Affairs Noor ul Haqq Qadri was invited for an interview. Noor ul Haqq Qadri declared this campaign anti Islam. He wrote a letter on 9th February, 2022 to Prime minister of Pakistan in which he demanded to ban this campaign of aurat March. The main point of the letter was that (English translation) “A woman has the right to raise her voice against oppression. It is our Islamic and religious duty
of all kinds. But the slogans and speeches made in the name of this in last few years are extremely moral defeat which can not be brought into the language of decent human being.” In this show famous host Shahzaib Khanzada talked about slogans.

Table 1. Statistics of News Channels: Subscribers, Talk shows Airig Date and Youtube Views

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>News Channel With Number of Subscribers</th>
<th>Talk Show</th>
<th>Date of Airing</th>
<th>No. of YouTube views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Geo News 12.5 millions</td>
<td>Aaj Shahzaib khanzada kay sath</td>
<td>February 18, 2022</td>
<td>10,078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bol News 5.68 millions</td>
<td>National Debate with Jameel Farooqi</td>
<td>February 21, 2022</td>
<td>110,674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Samaa Tv 8.47 millions</td>
<td>7 se 8 with Kiran Naaz</td>
<td>February 17, 2022</td>
<td>10,093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bol News 5.68 millions</td>
<td>Ab Baat Hogi</td>
<td>March 6, 2022</td>
<td>7,122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. “*Padhy gi to barrhy gi*”. Literal translation ‘If you study, you will grow’.

Picture 1. One of the Slogans red “*Padhy gi to barrhy gi*”. 
Discourse analysis of Pakistan media coverage during “aurat march” 2022: A feminist approach (A. Tabassum, A. Farid, & H. Akhtar)

2. “I March for Rape Victims”.

Picture 2. One of the Slogans red ‘I March for Rape Victims’.

3. “Maa hoon, behn hoon gaali nahi hoon”. Literal translation ‘I am a mother, I am a sister, I am not abusive’.

Picture 3. One of the Slogans red “Maa hoon, behn hoon gaali nahi hoon”.

A show with posters on various topics pitted Nur-ul-Haq Qadri against the parade. The narrow and problematic discourse about the unique identity of the organizers and participants of the Aurat March
was addressed, and an independent investigation was launched in accordance with the principles of responsible journalism to create a new case. However, this bipartisan approach affected the show’s overall ratings. Likes for YouTube videos are relatively lower than for more outrageous and controversial talk shows. Shahzaib Khantzada demanded to talk about any slogan for which he had objection. And Noor ul Haqq Qadri simply stated that he had an objection of the way they are expressing.

Famous talkshow “National Debate with Jameel Farooqi” aired on Bol news on 21st Feb, 2022 with the point “Aurat March Quran sy baghwat hai, aurton ko sarkon par kon laya” got views at highest length. In this talkshow a question was raised about the equality of men and women. And while giving answer to that question an American woman and columnist Tayyaba Zia Cheema used such shameful phrases for women like “waahyati” which has bad connotation used in negative sense for women being part of aurat march, “Quran say baghwat kar rahi hein” literal translation (They are rebelling against the Quran). In this show the highlighted word was “takleef” for women literal translation (trouble). An American columnist stated “Smajh nahi aati kis kay khilaf barbari chahti hein, jisko pait sy paida kiya. Puttar hi shohr bnta hai. Tera qusoor hai sara, march ki zrurt Nahi” literal translation (I don’t understand who they want equality against whom they are born from the womb. Only the son becomes the husband. It’s all your fault, no need of march”)

In another famous show “7 se 8 with Kiran Naaz” Mufti Zubair was asked a question about the hijab of women and Mufti Zubair gave a well mannered answer by having strong postion in the side of women that if they are facing problems like marriage with quran, problems in education, and divorce problems, then it’s their right to protest. But he strongly condemned the slogan like:

1. Sadak tumhary baap ki nahi hai (The road is not your father’s).
2. Aurat bacha paida karny ki machine Nahi hai (Woman is not a child-making machine).
3. Mujhy kia maloom tumhara moza kahan hai (how can I know where your socks are!).

Mufti Zubair declared these slogans against Eastern traditions and endorsed the letter written by Noor ul Haqq Qadri and requested the prime minister of Pakistan to ban aurat march.
Maliha Hashmi, a prominent global health leader in talk show “Abb Bat hogi” aired on March 6, 2022 focused on the basic rights which are not given to women in Pakistan. She focused on the point that contribution of women in every field of life is not deniable but we need to address the basic problems faced by women in Pakistan like they are given divorce for not giving birth to a baby boy, they are not given proper rights of education and they are considered shameless for the marriage of their will.

![Figure 1. Highest Number of Views of Talk Shows](image)

Discussion

The agenda setting theory of communication, formulated by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, highlights the media’s role in shaping public perception by focusing on specific stories repeatedly. This repetition leads individuals to perceive these stories as more important than others, influencing their opinions and attitudes. In the context of the Aurat March, it is evident that the media played a significant role in agenda setting.

During talk shows, the anchorpersons primarily emphasized discussions around playcards associated with the Aurat March that evoked anti-feminism views. By consistently highlighting these specific aspects, the media might have aimed to generate controversy and engage audiences. This approach suggests that sensationalism and
capturing attention were prioritized over providing a balanced and comprehensive portrayal of the Aurat March.

The high number of views on emotionally charged YouTube videos related to the Aurat March indicates a public expectation for scandalous content, which in turn suggests a potential desire for commercial popularity. This raises questions about the motives behind such coverage and whether it served the purpose of genuine dialogue and understanding of the movement.

It is noteworthy that the talk show titled "National Debate with Jameel Farooqi" garnered the highest number of views. This suggests that this particular show had a significant impact on public discourse and shaped opinions regarding the Aurat March. The choice of this talk show for acquiring diverse perspectives and discussing the movement indicates its influence on public opinion formation.

However, it is important to critically evaluate the content and format of these talk shows. From the selection of panelists to the issues raised and the manner in which they were discussed, it becomes apparent that each aspect of the talk shows presented a biased picture. The discussions were often polarized, with opinions either favoring or opposing the Aurat March. This one-sided portrayal may have influenced public perceptions by limiting the range of perspectives presented and hindering a more nuanced understanding of the movement's goals and aspirations.

To gain a comprehensive understanding, further analysis should explore the potential consequences of this media coverage on public attitudes and the broader impact on the Aurat March movement itself. This could involve studying the effects of the biased narrative, sensationalism, and polarization on public support, public discourse, and the movement's ability to achieve its objectives. Additionally, examining the role of media ethics and responsible journalism in shaping discussions around social movements can provide valuable insights into the media's influence on public opinion and societal change.

CONCLUSION

There exists a problem with women rights in Pakistan. The problem arises from the misunderstood discourse related to the movement. Explaining on side of the picture and covering the other side of the picture and doing so with the help of religious rhetoric, is a
story which has been told again and again in the history of Pakistan. The situation is similar with Pakistani news channels. The shows which discussed contentious and culturally insensitive content about aurat march got higher views. On the contrary hosts who presented both sides of the picture with utmost neutrality got low viewership.

Pakistani media made aurat march controversial in viewer’s mind due to which the main focus of the public remained on misrepresented discourse instead of real issues and problems faced by women in Pakistan. Like other movements, aurat march should be given proper awareness for showing gender issues in public realm.

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