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The West and the Feminist: Contemporary Feminist Activism in Pakistan and the Politics of National Culture

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Introduction

Every year since 2018, Hum Auratain, a transregional feminist collective in Pakistan, organizes a women's march in major urban centres of the country, such as Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar, and Quetta. "Aurat March" [trans. "The Women's March"] is the name given to this annual gathering of feminists, queer individuals, activists, and organizers. The collective describes itself as follows: "Our feminism is queer, trans-inclusive, class conscious and seeks to embrace various disabilities – we seek to ensure intersectional politics that takes into account gender in relation to various other oppressions and injustices."¹ Each year, the Aurat March receives extensive coverage in mainstream media, news channels, and social media posts. For the most part, this coverage is far from favourable. One of the most notorious features of the Aurat March is the posters that participants carry, photograph and circulate through Facebook and Twitter posts. Since 2018, various posters from the Aurat March have gone "viral" on Pakistani social media, and have driven impassioned debates in mainstream news coverage, talk shows, and social media posts, on cultural values and norms.

One poster from the march that went viral on social media in 2018 seemed to especially hit a nerve across the nation. The poster proclaimed: *Khana khud garam karlo* [Trans. Heat your food yourself]. Criticized for crossing boundaries, showing disrespect to cultural norms, and equating women's rights to "trivial matters" such as the heating of food, the phrase and the poster (as a photograph on social media), became almost synonymous with the politics of the Aurat March. An example of the critique made of the poster is as follows: the Facebook page "Satirical Affairs" re-posted the photograph of the poster, with the caption, "The kind of things phuarr [trans. Unequipped to perform domestic tasks] women want, bet this woman can't fry an egg but wants to change the world."



Fig 1. Post from Facebook Page "Satirical Affairs" criticizing the Aurat March

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/auratmarchlahore/posts/592942244514574>

The reaction towards this poster and its virality was summed up by Ammar Rashid, a leftist organizer in Pakistan: “The amount of men losing their shit over this placard from the #AuratMarch is basically proof that few things terrify Pakistani men more about feminism than the thought of not having women as their unpaid domestic servants anymore.”²

In the marches that followed in 2019 and 2020, another set of posters became the subject of nation-wide critique. Of these, some of the most (notoriously) popular posters said, *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* [My Body, My Will], *Lo Beth Gayi Sahi Say* [Am I sitting correctly now?], and *Izzat naheen insaan hay aurat* [A woman is human, not your honour]. One of the main criticisms levied at these viral posters that bring up domestic labour and explicitly reference the female body, is that the call for a re-organization of domestic roles, and a disrespectful tone towards cultural values, is proof that feminism is a “Western” import. The argument goes: women’s rights are important issues, but we must not lose our own cultural identity in addressing them.

In this paper, I aim to explore how we can understand the category of the “West” in relation to critiques of national culture. On the one hand, as Chandra Mohanty reminds us, it is important that we seek to dismantle the assumptions in feminist scholarship that take “the west” as the primary referent for theory and praxis (2000). On the other hand, how do we address the erasure that comes from dismissing cultural critique born out of feminist thought as a “western import?” How do we understand feminist language that is shaped and informed by transnational circuits of activism, and is then mobilized to critique “local” cultural values? And how can we best understand the category of the “West” in relation to the contemporary feminist movement in Pakistan?

In order to grapple with these questions, I turn to Frantz Fanon’s theorization of national culture and how a national culture develops in the wake of colonialism (1967). I argue that the figure of the feminist in Pakistan and its association with a Westernized subjectivity, can be read as Fanon’s “native intellectual:” one that does not have a static relationship to the “West” as it sets out to critique existing norms and traditions in “local” contexts. To make this argument, I examine two media forms: first, how the figure of the feminist and its associations with the West is invoked on mainstream television, and second, how the Aurat March organizers construct a critique of existing cultural norms that is both borrowed from transnational feminist thought and practice and is also attentive to Pakistan’s own cultural memory.

The Conceptual Use of “National Culture”

Where must an engagement with the concept of “national culture” begin? We can look towards Benedict Anderson’s framing of “imagined communities” to trace the development of the critical study of “culture” in the context of a nation-state. Anderson explains that nations are imagined as communities, because they rely on the idea of a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (1983, p. 7), which enables all members to share the idea of belonging to a community, namely, the nation-state.

² <https://twitter.com/ammarrashid/status/972531153918939136?lang=en>

Post-colonial scholarship has problematized this idea of “horizontal comradeship,” which can lead us to posit a static analysis of culture. Homi Bhabha, for example, writes in “Nation and Narration:” “To write the story of the nation demands that we articulate the archaic ambivalence that informs modernity” (1990, p. 292). Here, Bhabha identifies two issues that are inherently and critically linked to each other: the ambivalence of narratives, and the role of the writer who takes on this task. In the South Asian sub-continent, political resistance against British colonialism took on the task of defining the boundaries of nation and culture against perceived Westernization of texts, textuality, and institutions. As a result, 19th and 20th century intellectual and nationalist movements, such as the Aligarh movement in North India, the Arya Samaj in Punjab and Maharashtra, the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, and of course, the political stances of All-India Congress and All-India Muslim league (the two political entities negotiating with the British government for Indian independence) were deeply entrenched in differing and often opposing ideas about what it meant to define nationhood and culture against British colonialism.

As such, “national culture” emerges as a fraught category in postcolonial South Asia: there is much at stake in writing and claiming culture, and articulating its boundaries and inheritors. On the one hand, we can look at the development of national culture as a concept that is claimed, articulated, and inherited in the mainstream, outside of or at least separate in its operation from academic discourse, and on the other hand, we can think of post-colonial scholarship as demarcating and pushing the boundaries of what it means to “have” national culture. In this essay, I am interested in how we can bridge together these two developments of national culture – how can we understand culture not just as an object of theory, but one that responds, grows, and articulates itself in the public sphere, in particular, against colonial violences? Here, I find that Fanon helps us formulate a connection between the stakes of defining national culture, anti-colonial impulses, and the work of critique, whether this work is located within the academy or outside of it.

Fanon’s theorization of national culture is a compelling one, as it does not treat culture as a pre-given category, as an entity that is always already there. In the framework that Fanon provides, national culture is one that is worked towards in phases, through re-assessment and critique. Fanon also explicitly addresses the relationship between the native intellectual (who engages with and produces thought about a national culture) and European imperialism. He shows that the native intellectual does not have a static relationship with European legacies and modes of thinking. As the native intellectual grows and progresses, they become more in sync with cultural memory, and are able to “see through” the fallacies of European thought that perpetuates Western imperialism. Fanon writes:

[In the first phase] his writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country. His inspiration is European [...] In the second phase we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is. Finally, in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. (1967, p. 40)

Using Fanon’s theorization of the “phases” that the native intellectual goes through, it is possible to understand that the native intellectual’s reflection on national culture or culture that is “of the soil” has an unstable relationship to European legacies. Even as the native intellectual may be influenced by a discursive colonization, Fanon highlights that the act of remembering, or tapping into cultural memory,

helps to transform or de-stabilize this relationship and produce a “fighting literature” (*ibid.*) that serves a colonized nation in its journey towards freedom. Ultimately, Fanon’s theorization helps us to understand that a “decolonized” national culture comes about through the task of critique, which the native intellectual aids: “The desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one’s own people” (p. 42).

“Remembering” The Gendered Politics of National Culture

Our ways of knowing carry, curate, and change us as we change, construct, and carry them.
(Minai and Shroff, 2019, p. 41)

The relationship between feminism and the hegemony of western scholarship is a tense one. Chandra Mohanty reminds us that, “western feminist writing on women in the third world must be considered in the context of global hegemony of western scholarship” (1988, p. 62). In thinking about the contemporary feminist movement in Pakistan, it is important to acknowledge that feminist organizers, as they reference theories of intersectionality and articulate their politics in English across social media, have access to literacy and language that is not widely available in the country. Moreover, the term “feminist” itself does not currently have a vernacular alternate. As such, the feminist lineage that envisions ‘feminist’ as a mobilizing identity through initiatives such as women’s marches is most certainly influenced by and made possible through histories of feminism originating in the Global North. However, I hope to show that this relationship of feminist thought with histories of activism in the Global North does not mean that a critique of national culture is necessarily Eurocentric. Here, I find it useful to turn to Fanon’s essay, “On National Culture,” in which he describes the intellectual growth of the native scholar or critic.

In Fanon’s framework, the force that “awakens” the native intellectual to detach themselves from European thought is memory. Fanon writes, “We find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is. Past happenings of the bygone days of his childhood will be brought up out of the depths of his memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed estheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies” (1967, p. 42). Fanon’s emphasis on the “recovery” of a decolonized self through memory might raise the following question: What is the role of cultural memory as it charges thought and language, and helps the intellectual (in the Fanonian sense) detach themselves from modes of thinking that perpetuate Western imperialism?

Cultural memory can be understood as “the juncture where the individual and the social come together, where the person is called on to illustrate the social formation in its heterogeneity and complexity” (Hirsch and Smith, 2002). In other words, cultural memory can be a conceptual tool to analyse and interpret social formations in politically strategic ways. What is at stake in mobilizing cultural memory for critique, as Fanon hints at, is that memory re-orientes how notions of identity, nationality, and colonization are framed. It is through memory that a “way of seeing” might emerge. For a feminist drawing on either Western or South Asian feminist traditions of knowledge, this might mean tapping into cultural memory to review and reinterpret “old legends” of cultural values and norms.

As such, a feminist critique of a patriarchal and heteronormative national culture is rooted in cultural memory that reminds us that the consolidation of national culture was always a gendered endeavour.

South Asian feminist critique that seeks to use this cultural memory can be compelling for both articulating the violence of “culture” and to argue for cultural models of engaging with gendered and sexualized bodily in radically different ways. The need for an articulation of these violences/visions is especially important in South Asia since the rhetoric around “national culture,” especially in response to colonial rule, was fashioned mainly by male, elite, upper-caste members of Indian society. These male elites responded to British colonialism in the 18th century in masculine ways, as the British colonial administration fashioned a discourse that established civilizational superiority of the “West” over the “East” on the basis of considering indigenous Indian domesticity as “degenerate.” Thus, the home and the gender roles operative within it became a key site for the nationalist struggle to assert cultural authenticity as well as civilizational worth.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century South Asia, domesticity as a cultural form and practice became the site where “notions of modernity, progress, and new nation were embedded” (Banerjee, 2010, p. 456), both by the colonial state as well as Indian intelligentsia that used domesticity to “carve out its autonomous and hegemonic subjecthood” (p. 462) in response to colonial discourse on Indian domesticity (Chatterjee, 1989). These visions of domestic life as developed by the Indian intelligentsia also reinforced hierarchical relations between caste, class, and gender. For example, the domestic manuals produced by upper and middle class Indian male intellectuals, “...charted a new vision of the domestic ideal and prescribed a specific code of conduct for middle-class women thereby carefully distancing them from other social classes” (Banerjee, 2010, p. 462).

One of these strands of domestic manuals produced by male writers was that of the North Indian Muslim reformers in the 19th century, who “resisted the rising Western cultural hegemony by emphasizing sharia (Islamic laws) and the advancement of Muslim cultural heritage” (Ali, 2004, p. 125). Such domestic manuals were invested in the production of “shareef” or respectable ideals within the home, and a middle-class domestic life that was aligned with Sunni Muslim respectability. Kamran Asdar Ali also identifies the importance of these visions of domesticity to cultural and national life in Pakistan today, noting that, “dominant Pakistani national culture historically can be traced to the reformist politics of the Muslim elite in North India” (*ibid.*).

Veena Das’ work on the gendered and sexual violence implicit in nation-making in South Asia after Partition also shows that the institution of a social contract with the nation-state is based on the creation of “nation” as a masculine entity. Das writes, “anxieties around sexuality and purity created the grounds on which the figure of the violated woman became an important mobilizing point for reinstating the nation as a ‘pure’ and masculine space” (Das, 2007). Here, Das specifically references the Partition of 1947, which entailed the states of India and Pakistan deciding the fate of “abducted women” that were assaulted and kidnapped on either side of the border as the Partition unfolded. Such a memory of nation reminds us that national identity and culture-making is always already marked by the politics of gender and sexuality.

It is this gendered memory of national culture that enables the contemporary feminist movement in urban centres of Pakistan to posit a critique of “national culture.” It is cultural memory dating back to 18th century India that mobilizes critique, and not a dependence on “Western” ways of thinking, which feminists in

South Asia are often accused and criticized for. A blog titled “Feminism -- is it about modernity or cultural invasion” aptly sums up the line of criticism directed at the contemporary feminist movement in Pakistan:

Our values are: men are protector of women and women are the one who most supportable and close to men. Islam forbids same sex marriage and ask to go for opposite gender. Unfortunately, feminism in Pakistan inducted by west culture, ruined our culture. Women in Pakistan started following western culture. They play cards like *Mera jism Meri Marz*, I am not a production machine and *Apna Khana khud Garam karlo* attack our values and norms. We being Muslim society have to stop this invasion to prevent a terrible destruction. A nation can make itself a progressive on the basis of values. It is values that differ a nation from others. In order to save our generation from western culture, we have to revive our cultural values and norms. (Bhutto, 2020)

As this blog indicates, feminist language and stances come to bear the burden of being “foreign,” even as they circulate and become part of the vernacular. In other words, being *in* language does not equate to being *of that* language. Pakistani feminists are often charged with advocating for “Western” notions of family, culture, and bodily expression. As such, even when “local” languages are deployed to articulate feminist stances, the stance itself bears the imprint of being “foreign.” Even as feminists speak their own language, the thought process itself that shapes speech, or the lineage of thought such speaking borrows from, is relegated to the realm of the in-authentic. Phrases like *Khana Khud Garam Karlo* can often only become part of the popular and the everyday through ridicule and suspicion; the terms on which they can become forms of the vernacular can entail being placed with expressions like “siyapa” [a huge problem]. The circulation and consumption of *Khana Khud Garam Kar Lo*, then, invites us to reflect on the challenges Pakistani women and gender minorities face in framing feminist thought.

In the Mainstream

I will first turn to the television drama *Khana Khud Garam Karlo*, broadcasted in early 2019 just before the second Aurat March prepared to gather in the month March. This drama is the story of Rumana and Manzar, a newly married couple who have their own house. They have a neighbour, Jamila called Jammy, who is the most interesting and provocative character in the narrative. She is the feminist: always on the brink of swearing, she is upper class, she has a job, and she has no regard for other human beings, especially her husband, whose life she completely controls. Jamila’s husband is portrayed as an emasculated figure with no agency of his own inside the house. The figure of the feminist, then, is portrayed as immoral, privileged by class, and insensitive towards personal relationships.

A feature on the ARY television drama in *Images, Dawn* includes an interview with one of the actors in the drama, Aimen Khan. Aimen Khan (2020) explains, “This drama is not dogmatically feminist against what the name suggests. It’s real, witty and intelligent and it defies the unreal ideology of feminism.”

In order to understand the gendered politics of script writing within the Pakistani television industry that seeks to write against the “ideology of feminism,” and from which the script of *Khana Khud Garam Karlo* originates, it is first important to turn to a brief history of television scripts in the country. Since the

privatization of the television industry in Pakistan in the early 2000s, one of the most popular entertainment genres in the country is that of television dramas. With major networks like GEO, ARY Digital, and Hum TV dedicating an entire channel just for the broadcasting of drama, drama production and consumption have become a major contributor to the media economy of the country. However, with the transformation of the economic model of TV in Pakistan, the aesthetic and literary lineage of script writing began to shift. While at the state-owned television channel, Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV), a clearly left-leaning collective of writers worked, produced, and directed drama scripts, the privatization of television changed the landscape of script writing.

Television-script writing today has been taken up by a different set of writers, who are invested in creating a moral universe for the middle-class Urdu-speaking domestic setting. Umera Ahmed, who has written *Zindagi Gulzar Hay* (Life is Beautiful, 2012), is one of the most popular writers in both television script-writing and Urdu novel-writing in contemporary Pakistan. The novels she has written, such as *Peer-e-Kamil* (The Perfect Mentor, 2004), *Shehr-e-Zaat* (*The City of Self*, 2002), and *Zindagi Gulzar Hay*, are based on her advocacy of a Sunni, orthodox Islam and the morality it engenders. In *Peer-e-Kamil*, for example, the main character is an Ahmadi Muslim who journeys towards the “pure” essence of Sunni Islam after learning about the “evils” of unorthodoxy.

Maryam Wasif Khan (2019) theorizes this stream of Urdu literature that Umera Ahmed is part of as a “literary populism defined by its anti-elite attitude.” A *Friday Times* review of Umera Ahmed’s work compares it to Nazir Ahmed’s *Mirat-ul-Uroos*: “The reality that we grew up with is that Deputy Nazir Ahmed’s *Mirat-ul-Uroos* is part of our school curriculum and Umera Ahmed’s *Peer-e-Kamil* is the undisputed best seller in contemporary fiction: basically a manual on how a shareef Muslim woman should behave at all times” (Javed, 2014). The understanding of contemporary Urdu novel-writing as manuals of sharaafat alludes to the domestic ideals propagated by the North Indian Muslim elite in the 19th century. Sharaafat, in general, refers to conforming with respectable codes of conduct. However, it is also a highly gendered respectability; sharaafat entails adherence to domestic roles, in which sharif bibi are parda-nashin, or observe the veil in some form, and always adhere to domestic duties, making sure to always aspire to the role of the good wife who is in service to her husband and in-laws, and a good mother who inculcates the same values in the next generation.

This adherence to a gendered sharaafat is rooted in a moral stance: a respectable, morally up-right woman and man will adhere to their respective gender roles, in which the man is the head of the house, and the woman performs carework and domestic labour to constitute a sharif, domestic setting. Some of the most popular titles recently produced in Urdu literature, including Umera Ahmed’s fiction, especially stories like *Peer-e-Kaamil*, *Zindagi Gulzar Hay*, and Nimra Ahmed’s *Jannat ke Pattay* (The Leaves of Heaven, 2013) take strong moral stances about who is Muslim and who is not, and operate within the realm of a Sunni Muslim morality and respectability. Because such writers like Umera Ahmed are now writing for television, it is therefore important to examine how the shareef moral universe created in this populist literature migrates to television.

In *Khana Khud Garam Karlo*, it is the feminist character, Jamila or Jammy, who falls decidedly on the side of evil and is portrayed as “inciting” Rumana, the newly married woman. She incites Rumana to tell her husband she will be doing a job, she would not be staying at home, and she would not be doing the

housework. As it turns out, Rumana does not really want a job, and has a lot of domestic help to do the house chores for her. The insistence on not doing domestic chores is portrayed as just “acting out” and attention seeking on Rumana’s part because she does not really need the things that Jamila, as a feminist, tells her she needs. In the drama, Jamila is constantly misreading Rumana’s situation and making her disrupt her marriage. In the climax scene, where Rumana’s husband confronts her and makes her realize how Jamila is ruining her life, he says, “Ye aurat tumhara dimagh bhi aur tumhara ghar bhi tabah kar rahi hay.” [This woman is ruining your brain as well as your home.]

As such, the figure of the feminist is equated to selfishness, immorality, and irrationality, out to destroy the fabric of South Asian domestic life. Towards the end of the drama, Jamila is driven out of the lives of Rumana and Manzar. The drama shows Rumana and her husband in their own house – morality becomes ascribed to them as a heterosexual couple after the figure of the feminist has been removed and fought off, and they are affirmed as the balanced, moral, and rational individuals in the narrative. The drama ends with a midshot of a smiling, heterosexual couple who have ridden themselves of a feminist. Rumana’s husband closes the story by telling his wife, “Shiddat pasandi kisi cheez main bhi kaam naheen ati, khaas taur pay rishton ko sambhalnay main.” [Extremism is not helpful anywhere, especially in managing our relationships.]

The two keywords I identified here were *shiddat pasandi* [extremism] and *rishtay* [relationships]. When the narrative touches the topic of family, of rishtay, it adopts a distinctly serious tone, as opposed to the humour that runs through the rest of the scenes. This last scene is serious as it unpacks why the figure of the feminist who says “khana khud garam karlo” is absurd. The absurdity that is associated with the phrase is paired with a sense of danger; and the danger is that the rishtay, or the heterosexual family and how it organizes a domestic space, starts being uprooted when the feminist enters the narrative.

Through Jamila’s character, it is possible to see how a relationship between the feminist and the “West” is perceived in mainstream representations of feminism. The disconnect and disrespect that Jamila embodies is associated with the Westernized subjectivity of Pakistani feminists. Feminists like Jamila are portrayed as uncritical receptors of ideas that violently disrupt the heteronormative family, and thus uncritically dismantle the cultural values inherent in the family system, one that distinguishes the “East” from the “West.”

Aurat March and Acts of Memory

Quite different from Jamila, feminist organizers for the Aurat March emphasize a nuanced solidarity with transnational feminist practice. An example of this is the anti-rape anthem that the Aurat March organizers and participants performed, recorded, and circulated through YouTube and Twitter in 2020. This anthem was inspired by similar ones being performed and recorded all over the world.

In late 2019, an anti-rape anthem originated in Chile, which featured Latin American women singing and performing a choreography for the song, “the rapist is you.” This song directs sharp critique at institutions such as the court, police, and the nation-state itself for normalizing violence over the bodies of women.

The song crossed national borders, and began to be adapted in various countries, including the U.S., U.K., Mexico, Greece, and Kenya.

In 2020, the organizers of Aurat March in the cities of Karachi and Lahore also decided to record a version of this anti-rape anthem, by the name of “Rapist ho tum” [The rapist is you]. The anthem written by women and non-binary people in Lahore was recorded and performed with the following lyrics:

*Piddarshahi wo mullah hay
Jo hamari paidaish pay
Fatwa lagata hay
Ye qatal hay, aur qatil azaad hay*

*[Patriarchy is the mullah
Who gives a fatwa on our existence
When we are born
This is murder, and the murderer roams free]*

Even as the anti-rape anthem borrowed from lyrics that originated elsewhere, the gendered memory of national culture is able to insert another institution in the anti-rape anthem: that of state-enforced religion. Similarly, the anti-rape anthem recorded and performed in Karachi included the following lyrics:

*Ye jaagirdaar
Ye sarkaar
Ye mullah, aur mazhab ke thekedaar
Aur wo rapist ho tum*

*[These feudal lords
This government
These mullahs and those who act like they own religion
The rapist is you]*

Here, Fanon’s discussion of memory re-animating “old legends” is especially pertinent: “old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed estheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies” (1967, p. 42). In Fanon’s framing, one of the functions that memory performs is that it changes our relationship to hegemonic narratives of history. In Pakistan, this plays out through the state’s framing of religion as the “origin story” of the nation. In hegemonic narratives, it is religion that justifies and makes possible the existence of Pakistan. Continually, on national events and days of remembrance, the state reminds its citizens of the popular slogan raised in nationalist movements pre-Partition: “Pakistan ka matlab kia, la ilaha illallah.” [What does Pakistan mean? There is no God but God.]

Since the 1980s, the women’s movement in Pakistan has consistently articulated a political response and organized effectively to address the use of religion to control women’s bodies. A feminist memory of culture, one that remembers state-enforced violence in the name of religion, allows the Aurat March

collective to “adapt” the anti-rape anthem to address the violence caused by figures of religious authority: the mullah, and the “owners” of religion in the country, namely state bodies. The anthem produced in Karachi also frames the lyrics as part of the larger movement towards the freedom of women and gender minorities in the country:

*Ab zulm naheen manzoor
Ham hain larnay ko tayyar
Taqat ka paasa paltay ga
Aur aurat hogi azaad*

*[We do not accept this violence
We are ready to fight
The power dynamics will shift
And women will be free]*



Fig 2. Aurat March anti-rape anthem in Karachi

One of the “modifications” made to the anti-rape anthem, then, is to frame it as part of the larger call for freedom that Aurat March stands for. Thus, the anti-rape anthem performed and recorded by the Aurat March collective, inspired by a transnational network of feminist activists and organizers, serves to discredit the critique that a relationship with feminist thought and language originating outside South Asia is necessarily destructive of “local” contexts. The critique of Aurat March content as “Western” therefore misses the fact that feminist solidarity generated with movements and contexts outside state borders is not limited by/to an alliance with feminists in the “West.” As the anti-rape anthem recorded by Aurat March shows, the insertion of cultural memory can help to build productive relationships with transnational feminist practice in critiquing the violent foundations of the masculine nation-state.

Another instance of reclamation that was a critical part of the Aurat March in 2019 and 2020 was the homage that participants paid to Qandeel Baloch. A rising social media star in Pakistan, Qandeel Baloch was famous for her videos and content, in which she openly discussed her sexual life and expressed her sexuality. In 2016, Qandeel Baloch was killed in an “honour killing” by her brothers. In mainstream media, although Qandeel’s death was condemned, so was her social media content. Her remembrance also involved mainstream media and critics criticizing her expressions of sexuality, arguing that she did not deserve to be remembered as an “icon” because of the nature of her content. Thus, Qandeel was also positioned as a “bad” cultural influence in mainstream media. The homage that Aurat March participants paid to Qandeel recognized that while “cultural values” might not make space for Qandeel, it was important to re-claim her life and death as that which lied squarely within the bounds of Pakistani culture: her life a testament to the rich traditions of entertainment that women draw on, and her death evidence of how the dictates of culture operate to perpetually condemn the participation of women in public discourse.



Fig 3. Aurat March participant asking for justice for Qandeel Baloch

In 2019 and 2020, Aurat March participants wore a Qandeel Baloch mask over their faces, paying homage to Qandeel’s legacy. A feminist memory of Qandeel understands her courage and uniqueness that shone through her content and gave space to a discourse around sexuality in Pakistan. In Lahore, as the anti-rape anthem adapted for the Aurat March audience was performed, participants wore the Qandeel Baloch mask while singing the lyrics. On its Instagram page, the Aurat March remembers Qandeel as follows: “Qandeel Baloch will live on as a symbol of what we fight for – to live on our terms, to occupy digital spaces and not be moral policed for it. For paving the way, we thank you Qandeel.” Thus, Qandeel’s memory is re-narrativized in opposition to mainstream media, and an articulation of culture as that which is violent, limiting and invested in moral policing comes to the forefront.

As part of its 2020 campaign, the Aurat March collective also initiated an “A to Z” of the march, aiming to address a larger audience for awareness regarding what the march stood for. As part of this “A to Z” initiative, the collective invited graphic designers, and artists to develop a vocabulary for the Aurat March, a literal “A B C” that could serve as an introduction to the larger campaign through explicit reference to Pakistani politics and history – a local vernacular. Each letter was paired with a word that was integral to the spirit of the Aurat March: D, for instance, stood for divorce, E stood for encroachment, as the state moves into low-income settlements and disrupts the lives of working-class women, and S for sanwali, or those with darker skin, as colourism in South Asia shapes the experiences of women who do not have light skin.

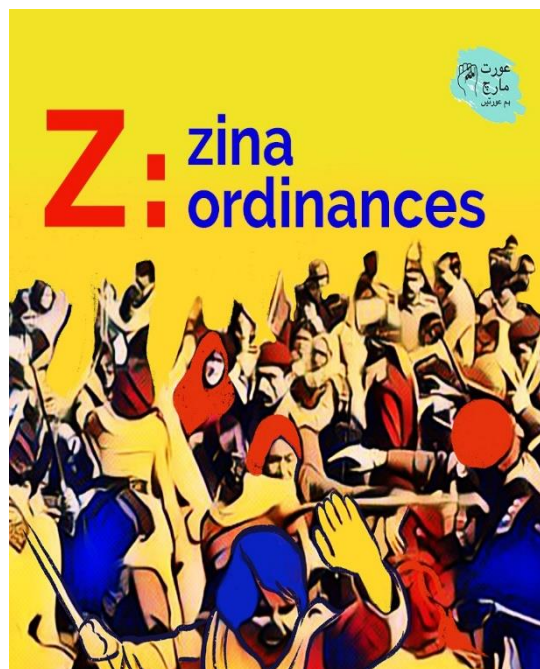


Fig. 4 Aurat March’s “A to Z” initiative

This alphabetized history of feminist thought and practice in Pakistan serves as a forceful reminder that radical traditions are constitutive of the country’s politics, and cannot be dismissed as a “Western” import. For example, the letter “Z” in this alphabetized history stood for zina ordinances, or the laws instated in General Zia-ul-Haq’s regime in Pakistan, under which women could be put on trial or face criminal charges for experiencing sexual assault. In putting up an illustration for zina ordinances on Instagram and Twitter, the Aurat March collective explicitly referenced the claim that feminism was a “Western concept.” The collective tweeted, “It’s interesting that naysayers call feminism in Pakistan a Western concept, when the history of our country is a testament to a womxn’s struggle for equality.”

By invoking the history of the women’s movement in Pakistan, the collective recast a feminist vision and politics into national history. We are reminded that feminism is not a “new” phenomenon in South Asia, nor in Pakistan, as the women’s movement had already gained traction in the 1980s, when women’s collectives such as the Women’s Action Forum (WAF) mobilized against the regime of the military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq. Under General Zia’s regime, oppressive laws were institutionalized that

continue to cause harm and violence to the bodies of women. As such, the vocabulary generated by the Aurat March reminds us that feminist politics are not “alien” to the national culture of the country. They are embedded within its norms and history.

A just reading of feminist thought in Pakistan should reckon with this embeddedness, forgoing lazy dismissals of radical traditions by thinking of them as Western impositions. As feminists, we have an array of languages at our disposal: what we speak of should be listened to and heard on our own terms, not deliberately misread, mistranslated, and misremembered.

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