

The Digital Rhetoric of Resistance: Intersectional Feminist Praxis by a Pakistani Instagram Activist

Abstract

This research examines the discourse of resistance produced by a Pakistani feminist influencer to challenge the patriarchal norms and gender hierarchies. We have collected fifty posts from the Instagram account of Atee (@myavaaz). We have employed Feminist Critical Discourse analysis to examine how the discourse constructs and deconstructs the gender inequalities. The analysis shows that Atee utilizes various discursive strategies, including evaluative language, first-person narration, and rhetorical questions. Her use of carousel posts strategically exposes post-marriage oppression, in-laws' control, and the normalization of abuse. The result foregrounds the micro-level domestic oppression where women face confinement to household labor, emotional manipulation, and economic dependence. Together, these mechanisms reveal how these social anomalies are sustained and produced through everyday discourses in Pakistani society. Focusing on Instagram as a feminist site of resistance, this study contributes to the burgeoning field of feminist critical discourse analysis and Pakistani feminism.

Keywords: Pakistani Digital Activism, Instagram, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Pakistani Activists, discursive strategies

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary feminist activism is rapidly growing across various digital platforms to amplify their voices, critique the marginalization and oppression of women. Through personal narration, compelling storytelling and shared knowledge about gender inequalities, women and marginalized groups are utilizing online spaces to build solidarity, resistance and collective awareness around social injustice. In Pakistan, networked feminist resistance is widely spreading on Digital spaces. Girls at Dhabbas is a substantial example of networked feminism. Girls at Dhabbas aimed to reclaim public spaces where women have traditionally been excluded or discouraged (Saeed, 2018). The movement was further expanded through the use of #GirlsatDhabbas. This hashtag challenged men's control over everyday public spaces by making women's presence visible and politically meaningful (Kalim, 2022). This digital turn in feminist movements is evident in increasingly womendriven movements on digital platforms. Similarly, on a Facebook women-only

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group, Soul Sisters Pakistan was initiated by Kanwal Ahmed. The purpose of this group was to create an online safe space for women where they can discuss their experiences and daily life concerns. Shahzadi, Mujtaba, & Anwar note that this group allowed women to discuss personal and social concerns, share experiences of sexism, and build supportive feminist communities (2024).

Hashtag movements are also an evolving form of activism across all online platforms. People use hashtags to form solidarity across digital platforms. It has become a defining feature of now a days Pakistani digital feminism. Hashtag movements such as #MeToo, #motorwayincident, #JusticeForNaqib, and #JusticeForZainab have demonstrated how digital protests can form solidarity and amplify public anger. These hashtags have been utilized to demand justice and raise awareness. Previous research has examined several aspects of the digital landscape, such as digital circulation (Kalim, 2023) and reactionary Twitter discourse around gender-based violence (Arshad, Jabir, & Ahmad, 2024). The Existing scholarship has proved that Facebook, Twitter/X, and hashtag activism can function as powerful tools for feminist expression and political intervention in Pakistan.

Despite the rapid growth of digital activism, Instagram remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining the Instagram posts of Pakistani digital activist Atee (@myavaaz). Instagram has variety of features like carousel posts, reels, captions, hashtags etc. making it a multimodal space. Activists are utilizing compelling storytelling, viral hooks and trending topics to actively engage their audience. These multimodal affordances enable activists to combine personal narration with political critique. This approach is different from Twitter/X-based hashtag activism or Facebook-based community building. This research offers a thorough examination of the Pakistani Instagram activist Atee (@myavaaz). Her work bridges local cultural sensitivities and digital resistance that's why it is significant to pay scholarly attention. She addresses the social issues that are usually treated as private family matters into a public feminist critique. She challenges the assumptions that normalize women's unpaid labor, obedience, silence, and dependence. She strategically uses posts, captions, and rhetorical questions. Her discourse is influenced by religious and cultural references, testimonial narration, and visual framing. By focusing on Instagram as a multimodal site of feminist activism, the present study contributes to scholarship on Pakistani digital feminism, feminist critical discourse analysis, and platform-based activism. The research demonstrates how the digital resistance is produced through everyday text that exposes hidden structures of patriarchy.

Research Questions

1. What discursive strategies and feminist themes are evident in the Instagram posts of Atee (@myavaaz)?
2. How does a Pakistani Instagram activist's discourse challenges gendered power relations in society?

LITERATURE REVIEW Digital Activism in Pakistan

Feminist activism has increasingly moved across digital platforms, recently. Social media platforms enable women and marginalized groups to narrate lived experiences, challenge dominant ideologies, and build solidarities beyond political institutions. Prior scholarship

on digital feminisms argues that online platforms have expanded the spaces through which feminist politics are articulated and contested. Scholars have examined hashtag feminism as a form of digital consciousness-raising. Digital platforms are viewed by feminist media scholars as socio-political arenas where speech produces identities, protests, and collective demands (Baer, 2016; Clark, 2016; Keller, 2016). The studies have highlighted how social media campaigns such as #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, and #WhyIStayed have proved that personal testimonies can be sites of a political critique (Mendes et al., 2018). Studies have also recommended against glorifying feminist digital activism excessively. For instance, online platforms are shaped by algorithmic visibility, surveillance, harassment, and platform capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Digital Activism in Pakistan

In Pakistan, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are vigorously utilized by activists to highlight systemic inequalities and mobilize audiences. Previous scholarship has provided insights into feminist activism in Pakistan on digital platforms. The existing work has underlined the use of digital spaces for reclamation (Mushtaq and Baig, 2021), the growing networked feminism (Kamal, 2022), the role of affective digital circulation (Kalim, 2023), and the complexities of Muslim feminism in South Asia (Atluri, 2022). These studies suggest that social media platforms have become crucial for feminist activism in Pakistan. These platforms enable women to articulate resistance, negotiate constraints, and challenge entrenched patriarchal norms with greater ease. However, most of the existing scholarship has focused on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. There is limited research on Instagram and its role in feminist activism. To address this gap, the present study explores how a Pakistani feminist activist utilizes Instagram to contribute to the advancement of new feminist perspectives.

Instagram as a Multimodal Site of Feminist Activism

In recent years, Instagram has emerged as a multifaceted platform for not only social interaction but social activism for various social issues such as climate change and gender and racial inequalities (Habib & Kalim, 2025). There are platforms' affordances of Instagram, such as the option of visual storytelling, carousel posts, and reels. These are useful for meaning-making. Instagram's features, such as live broadcasts, also create opportunities for activists to engage with audiences directly (Zapinno & Rubini, 2021). Feminists have also found Instagram useful. Barbala (2022) considers that "platformized feminism" as activists to use Instagram to create micro-themes on gender issues. In Pakistan, feminist activists like Kanwal Ahmed (@kanwalful), Shehzil Malik (@shehzilm), and Maliha Abidi (@maliha-z-art) also use Instagram for feminist advocacy and personalized branding. This shift in feminist activism shows a personalized digital resistance as storytelling and life coaching serve as tools to dismantle patriarchal exploitation. Atee (@myavaaz), who identifies as a mentor and coach, utilizes her Instagram to address issues related to marriage, identities, in-laws, motherhood, and social stigmas surrounding taboo topics in Pakistan.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

In this study, we used Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as a theoretical framework that combines the concerns of Critical Discourse Analysis and feminist theory.

We are drawn to FCDA, as it allows us to examine how discourse sustains, normalizes, and challenges gendered power relations (Lazar, 2014). FCDA considers gender functions as an ideological structure (Lazar, 2007). It suggests that gender is organized through unequal social relations. Men are often positioned as dominant and women as subordinate. This hierarchy is embedded in family practices, cultural norms, and everyday language. FCDA draws attention to the complexity of gender and power relations (Lazar, 2007). It examines subtle forms of power such as emotional manipulation, silencing, shame, dependency, and moral pressure. FCDA reminds us that discourse participates in the construction and deconstruction of gender (Lazar, 2007, 2017). Language shapes how gender roles, identities, and power relations are understood. As a matter of fact, FCDA further treats critical scholarship as a form of academic activism. Its purpose is not only to describe inequality but also to reveal the discursive mechanisms that sustain it and to support possibilities for social changes (Lazar, 2007). Moreover, FCDA requires critical reflexivity. The researcher must remain aware of her own interpretive position and of the socio-cultural context in which discourse is produced and circulated. FCDA is suitable for this study. Firstly, FCDA allows us to see how Atee's Instagram posts do not merely communicate personal views, but also expose how patriarchal meanings are produced through everyday assumptions about marriage, domestic labor, obedience, emotional control, and women's dependence. Secondly, we could see how Atee's posts challenge normalized beliefs about women's roles within the household and marriage via discourse. Finally, the activist orientation of FCDA is suitable for this study. The selected Instagram posts functioned as feminist interventions. They raise awareness and challenge silence around domestic oppression. A reflexive stance helped the study as analysis remained attentive to the context.

FCDA Scholarship

Feminist discourse analysis provides valuable insights into the challenges, forms of resistance, and complexities of feminist activism in Pakistan. Amber (2024) analyzed the Aurat March discourses through Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). She focused on online blogs that discussed the event. Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), Nartey (2021) analyzed Ghanaian feminists' blogs to examine how women leverage online media to project their voices and construct positive identities. He identifies three key resistance techniques: 1) criticizing patriarchy and systemic oppression, 2) challenging degrading gender narratives, and 3) celebrating women who resist sexism. Through careful language choices, these blogs empower Ghanaian and African women. In a follow-up study, Nartey (2024) examined Nigerian blogs to highlight FCDA's efficacy in analyzing feminist discourses. Nartey's findings showed the role of these blogs in fostering sociopolitical action and signal a commitment to social justice by amplifying women's voices and identities in contemporary Nigeria. These studies demonstrated that FCDA is a useful framework for analyzing feminist discourse because it connects linguistic choices with broader struggles over gender, power, representation, and social justice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative and interpretivist. We selected fifty Instagram posts published between 2021 and 2024 purposively from the research site. Following the Social Media

Analytical Framework (Stieglitz et al., 2014), an actor-based approach was deployed. This allowed us to give attention to the selected activist account Atee's (@myavaaz) as a key node within broader feminist communication networks. At the time of data collection, the Atee's (@myavaaz) account had 43,700 followers. We found a considerable level of reach and influence relevant for this study. We only collected publicly available posts. Posts were positively selected on the basis of their relevance to feminist themes and substantial public engagement. These posts were further archived and preserved data in form of screenshots. Selected posts were also coded by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic coding approach. we coded and organized into key themes related to 1) oppression, 2) empowerment, 3) resistance, and 5) solidarity. This approach allowed us to interpret data through FCDA.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Atee is the voice behind Instagram account @myavaaz. She is a Pakistani diaspora working to break oppressive cycles in South Asian communities. She identifies herself as a mentor and coach. Furthermore, she engages with the audience not only through her posts but also receives direct messages from Pakistani women. She actively uses carousel posts, captions, and hashtags. She challenges patriarchal norms, oppressive practices, and financial dependence of women. Her discourse contains a strategic blend of religious references, Islamic counter-discourses, and feminist resistance. She highlights the microdynamics of domestic oppression, household labor, and emotional manipulation. She often utilizes the technique of storytelling and captivating dialogue to engage the audience.



Figure 1: A screenshot showing the Instagram bio of @myavaaz

Critiquing Domestic Oppression and Gendered Labor

Atee confronts the domestic labor of women based on the gender divide in which men are viewed as breadwinners and women as caregivers. She critiques the systemic gendering of privilege and the unequal power dynamics that disempower women in Pakistan. She calls for social reforms to restore Islamic traditions and disapproves of social norms that benefit Pakistani men. In her carousel post, she tactfully blends strategies of rhetorical questions,

giving personal examples, and offering religious counter-narratives to challenge restrictive gender norms and reframe women's agency.

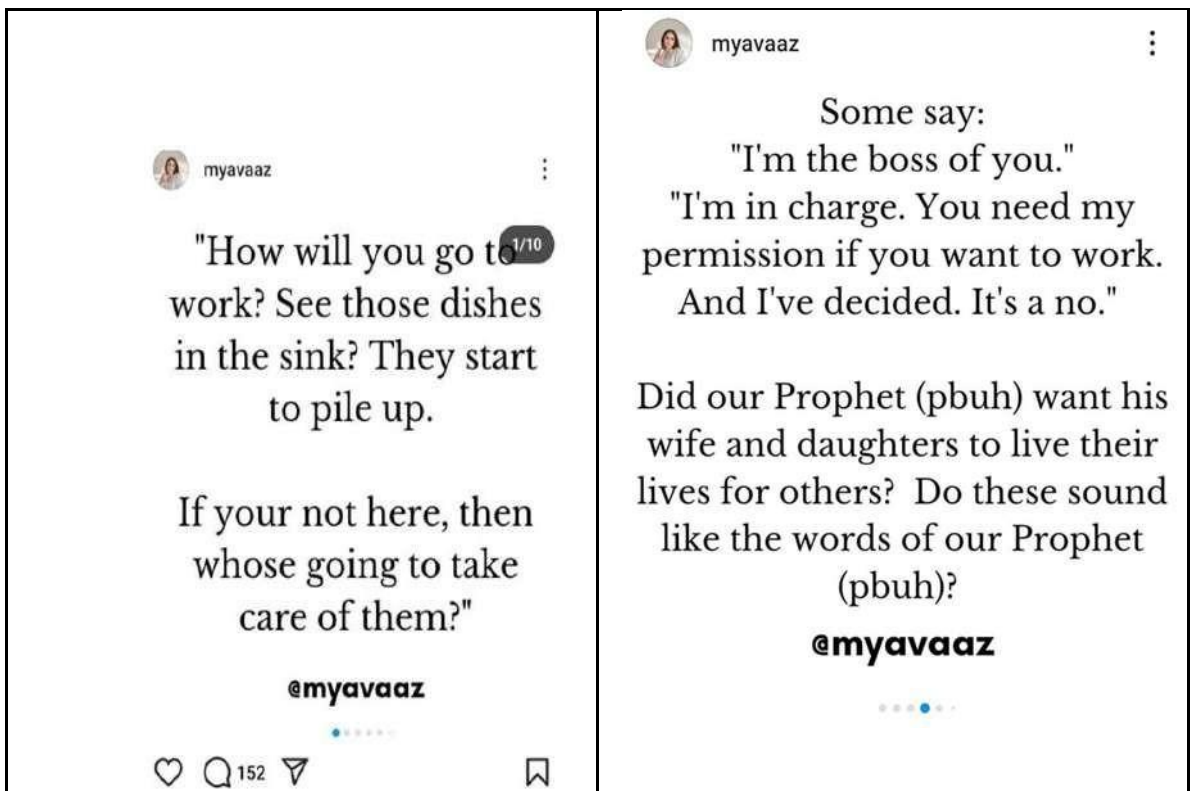


Figure 2: Atee's (@myavaaz) post on the domestic labor of women

The post highlights how domestic responsibilities restrict the social mobility and professional aspirations of women in Pakistan. She uses words like “dishes” and “sink” to draw attention to how language itself encodes gendered power relations by positioning household chores as inherently feminine obligations. She uses rhetorical questions to expose the naturalization of women's unpaid domestic labor: “*How will you go to work? See those dishes in the sink? They start to pile up. If you're not here, then who's going to take care of them?*” This framing reflects the preservation of traditional values that confine women to household roles. Her post reminds us how power is reproduced through everyday social structures. One of the striking features of Atee is the use of religious framing to dismantle masculine hegemony. She juxtaposes authoritarian language like “*I'm the boss*” and the prophetic example. The repetition of the pronoun “I” signals aggression and control. Her rhetorical question contrasts patriarchal statements with prophetic teachings. She asks: “*Did our Prophet (pbuh) want his wife and daughters to live their lives for others?*” Here she challenges the legitimacy of such misplaced authority. Atee deconstructs the professional-patriarchal paradox in Pakistani society. She exposes the domestic restrictions imposed by progressive men with high-status professions such as medicine and engineering. She uses the words “deny” and “right to work” to describe how even educated men perpetuate gender inequalities, enforcing a domestic “labor contract.”

Her post further expands the critique to a social level as she highlights the broader consequences of excluding women from public and economic life. She quantifies the scale of structural inequality. She shared how denying women the right to work excludes “*over 50% of the Muslim population.*” Her strategic use of numbers draws attention to the wasted potential of Pakistani women's absence from the workforce. The low female labor participation in Pakistan is 13–14% compared to men, 's 49%. This reflects ingrained beliefs that men are breadwinners and women are homemakers (Gutek et al., 1991; Rehman & Roomi, 2012). This post situates gender inequality as a systemic barrier to national development. From a feminist critical discourse analysis perspective, this carousel post exemplifies the principle of exposing and challenging power asymmetries and socially constructed discourses that sustain male dominance. Atee not only critiques patriarchal norms but also raises awareness and advances a feminist vision of equal gender relations.

Critiquing Traditional Gender Roles and Expectations of Pakistani Women Atee's posts reveal gender biases and create critical consciousness in a conservative setting, hence demonstrating feminist praxis. Atee uses resistance as a way of contesting patriarchal ideologies. She advocates for religious principles rather than male authority. She argues that Pakistani society is plagued by discursive hegemony and male supremacy.

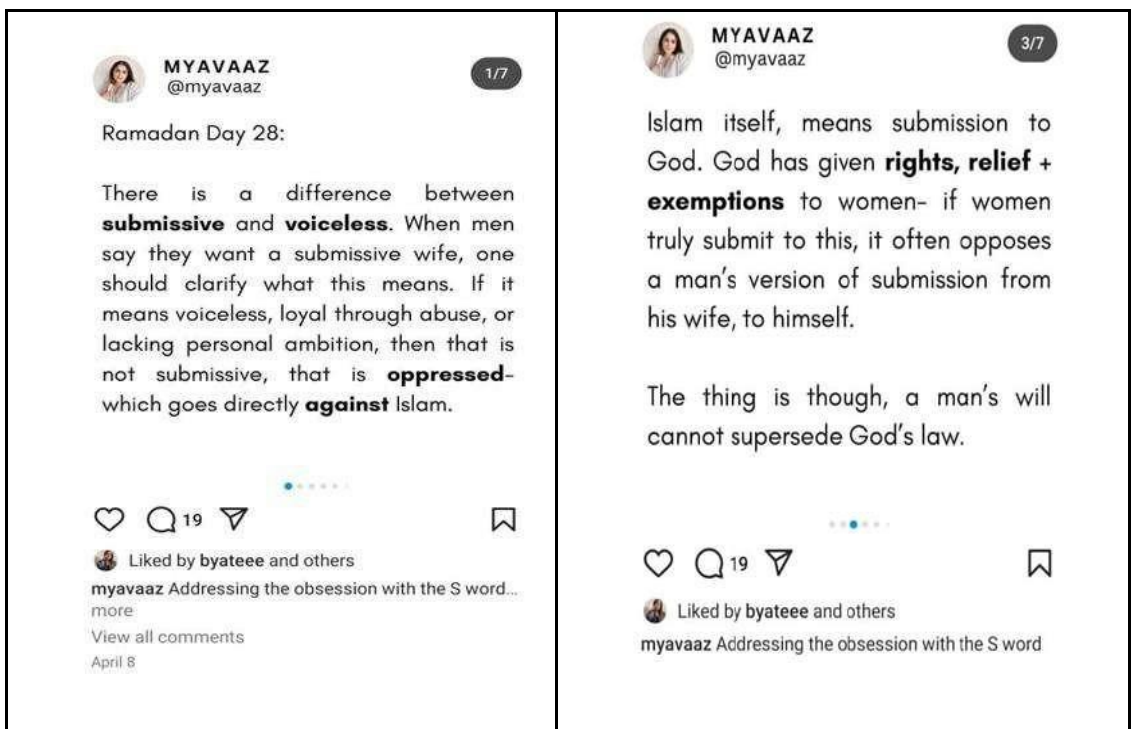


Figure 3: Atee's (@myavaaz) post on “Addressing the obsession with the S word (12)

This carousel post examines the intricate dynamics of the submission of women in South Asian Communities. She talks about the social expectation of "submissive wives" who

serve to control the behavior of women. She uses powerful language, such as “loyal through abuse,” to draw attention to the oppression faced by Pakistani women. In her post, she repeatedly emphasizes the term “submissive” to remind readers about the institutionalized pressures faced by females. She differentiates between submission and voicelessness, which she argues is a contradiction to Islamic values. She critiques the misuse of religion as a means of enforcing conformity: “*Many of the males from the Desi community use religion as a tool for conformity.*” Her post juxtaposes two perspectives of submission: 1) rooted in religious principles, and 2) constructed through patriarchal expectations. Attee’s post reframes submission as *obedience to God rather than men*. She underlines how men often attempt to subvert the divine notion by imposing their own version of submission onto women. She strategically uses bold characters to emphasize key terms such as “rights, relief + exemptions” and “God,” highlighting the positive and empowering aspects of submission to divine law. She uses phrases like “man’s unreasonable, irrational demands” to implicitly illustrate the negative, controlling, and patriarchal framing of women’s obedience. By using an assertive statement that “a man’s will cannot supersede God’s law,” She prompts readers to critically evaluate and resist men’s manipulation of religious narratives to justify gendered dominance. In this carousel post, Attee further argues that unreasonable patriarchal demands strip women of their rights and agency. Attee knows how deeply entrenched these patriarchal values are, so she advocates for gradual social change by encouraging women to confront these inherited patriarchal beliefs, aiming for social transformation and resistance to traditional gender roles.

Divorce and Stigma in the Pakistani Context

Another issue highlighted by Attee is Divorce, one of the most stigmatized issues in Pakistani society. She highlights the paradoxical expectations placed on Pakistani women on this issue, the social construction of the discourse around divorce, and the problems faced by divorced women in Pakistan.

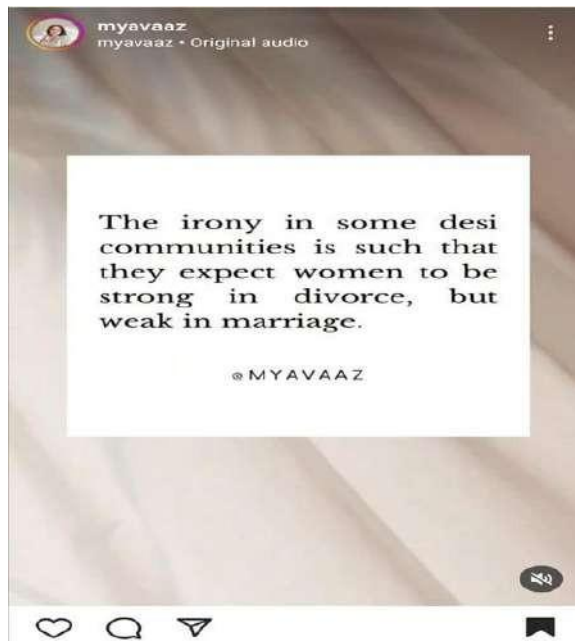


Figure 4: Atee's (@myavaaz) post on Divorce

Pakistani women are denied power within the marital sphere, and they are expected to exhibit resilience even when marriages fail. This highlights contradictory standards. She uses lexical contrasts “weak vs strong” to dramatize this double bind. The use of hashtags like #DivorcedNotDamaged also serves as a counter-discursive strategy, reframing divorce as freedom rather than shame. In the caption, she states that *“You can't reverse decades of asking women to be basically cowards and then blame them for not being strong enough during a divorce.”* From the FCDA perspective, this post reflects critical reflexivity as praxis. Atee exposes the contradiction of cultural conditioning and challenges the intergenerational training of female submission. Divorce has a substantial social stigma in Pakistani society. Women are expected to suffer problematic marriages rather than seek divorce (Nadeem, 2024). Another issue underlined by her is invoking Islamic law's allowance for khula. She reframes religious discourse as a potential resource for women's empowerment, countering cultural misinterpretations that stigmatize separation. Such awareness and resistance to contemporary patriarchal beliefs can help women organize women-friendly programs to support women.

Promoting Self-Worth and Agency

Atee in this carousel post highlights women's right to set boundaries and rejects the expectation of managing others' emotions. The post highlights how women are blamed for men's aggression, in-law egos, or extended family conflicts. She reframes self-care as feminist resistance (Lazar, 2007).

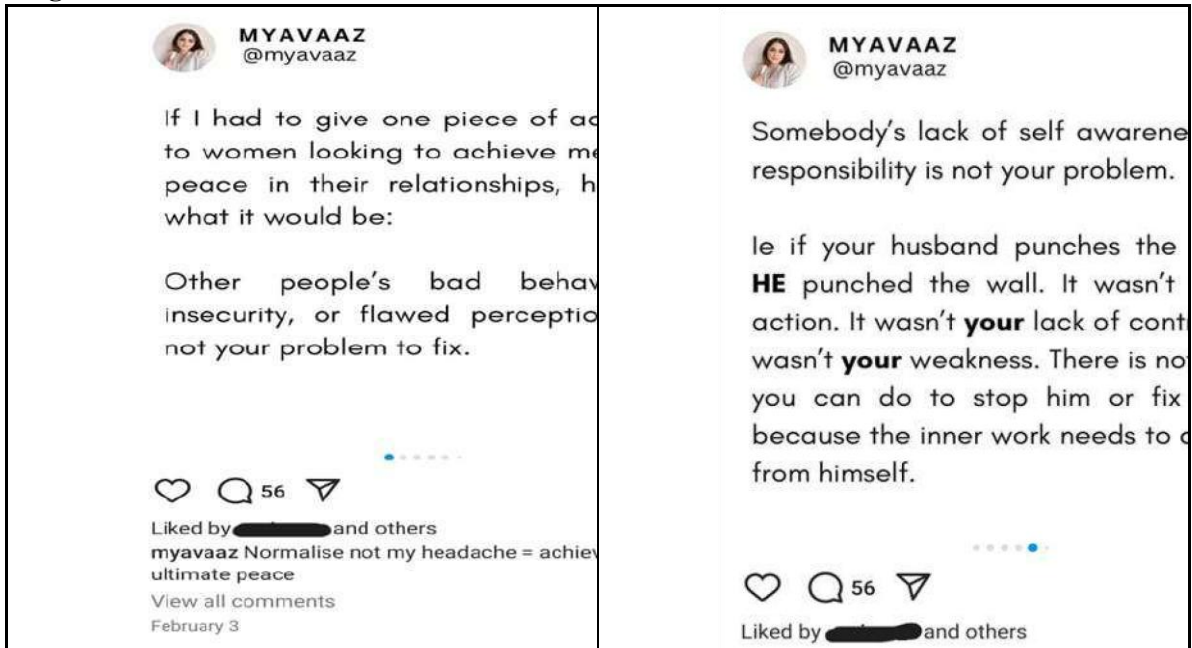


Figure 5: Atee's (@myavaaz) post on “Normalize not my headache = achieve ultimate peace”

In this carousel post, she advises women that “Other people's bad behaviour, insecurity, or flawed perception is not your problem to fix.” She rejects the cultural demand that women should preserve harmony at the expense of their own mental health. The use of declaratives and the equal sign (=) shift accountability back onto men. The strategic use of terms like “ingratitude/lens” exposes the constructed nature of male dissatisfaction. She further highlights in-law hierarchies. The use of kinship terms such as bhabhi grounds the critique in localized contexts. Atee also critiques the irrational policing of women by in-laws. She states, “If your husband punches the wall, HE punched the wall. It wasn't your action,” emphasizing male accountability.

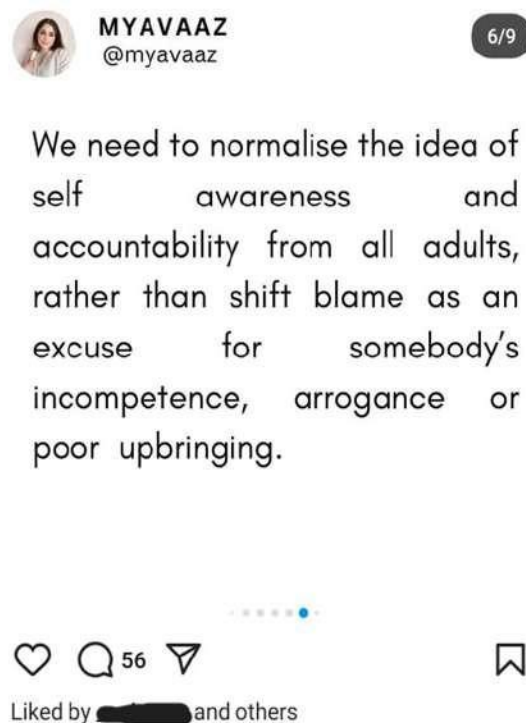


Figure 6: Atee's (@myavaaz) post on "Normalize not my headache = achieve ultimate peace"

She further broadens the critique to collective responsibility by stating, "We need to normalise self-awareness and accountability from all adults, rather than shift blame as an excuse for somebody's incompetence, arrogance, or poor upbringing." Here, the inclusive pronoun "we" frames accountability as a social value. She rejects the blaming of structural failings on women. She foregrounds how society inherits patriarchal patterns across generations and puts all the burden on women. In conclusion, she states, *"It's your choice to choose not to have a share in it. Not your headache."* She repeats the lexicon "choice" to assert boundaries as a feminist principle. She advises women to disengage from others' irrational behaviors. By reframing boundaries and accountability as feminist acts, Atee promotes self-worth and agency, linking personal empowerment to broader social transformation.

Atee has been using Instagram to primarily critique at the micro-level domestic oppression, focusing on the lived experiences of women within households, marriages, and intimate relationships. The analysis of her carousel posts on unpaid domestic labor, rhetorical posts on submissiveness, and hashtags such as #NormalizeNotMyHeadache demonstrated the invisible burdens placed on Pakistani women. She critiques gender bias within the household, aligning with previous studies showing that everyday family practices reinforce patriarchal structures in South Asia (Amjad & Rasul, 2017; Habiba et al., 2016, as cited in Ashfaq, 2024). Atee challenges male dominance and discursive control in Pakistani society.

Her posts function as social activism, raising awareness of traditional gender roles and oppressive expectations. She exposes post-marital oppression, in-law control, and normalized abuse. Her work demonstrates how gendered power relations in Pakistan are socially constructed and perpetuated through discourse (Lazar, 2007). She converges postmarital oppression and solidarity-building, addresses the stigmatization of divorce, and challenges the paradoxical expectations that women must remain submissive in marriage yet resilient in separation. She reframes divorce as liberation through hashtags such as #DivorcedNotDamaged. This demonstrates how digital feminist spaces can simultaneously critique oppressive systems and cultivate alternative communities of care. The analysis highlighted some of the key patterns: 1) the use of carousel posts on Instagram to share layered narratives that address marriage, in-laws, and social stigmas; 2) strategic use of first-person narration; 3) the use of evaluative, strong language; 4) rhetorical questioning to voice the lived reality of Pakistani women. Collectively, her posts highlight how Instagram functions as a feminist site of resistance, enabling the amplification of marginalized voices.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the discourse of emerging Pakistani feminist activists on Instagram. It found that the Instagram-driven activism can re-engineer the gendered norms through community-building, narrative framing, and digital activism. The study highlights the significance of digital platforms as a space for resistance and political engagement by blending digital activism and feminist rhetorical analysis. Atee utilizes Instagram as a perspective-sharing platform. Through compelling storytelling, first-person narration, and religious framing, she not only challenges the power asymmetries and oppression of women but also proposes solutions that can result in social emancipation and social transformation. Her praxis-oriented discourses reflect a form of feminist academic activism that contributes to social change by emphasizing the importance of collective action. This study contributes to FCDA theory by demonstrating how the principles of FCDA, particularly gender relationality, analytical activism, and critical reflexivity, operate in contemporary South Asian online platforms. The use of carousel posts reveals a different visual form of gender relationality that is not yet theorized in FCDA scholarship, which has mostly focused on textual analysis. The layered, multi-perspectival format of carousel posts enables her to present gendered power relations as well as personal, familial, and systemic. This allows followers to understand micro-level domestic conflicts within broader patriarchal structures. Moreover, her strategic use of religious discourse to resist patriarchal norms expands analytical activism beyond secular feminist frameworks. Atee leverages Islamic teachings to reframe women's rights and agency. She demonstrates that marginalized communities may employ religious authority to challenge patriarchal interpretations, a theoretically significant variation in FCDA applications. Ultimately, the study argues that critique alone cannot bring social change; it fosters the political awareness necessary for action. Through feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study explores how language both reflects and shapes power dynamics. It also reveals that activists are already catalyzing transformation by challenging traditional narratives and enhancing women's agency.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited in its scope and methodology. The data was collected from only one Instagram account (myavaaz). This allowed an in-depth exploration of activists' discourse, although the results cannot be generalized due to various reasons. First, the sample doesn't represent overall feminist perspectives in Pakistan. As Pakistan is a dynamic country with various feminist perspectives, for instance, liberal, socialist, religious, and secular ideologies. Second, the linguistic and gender studies may have influenced the data interpretation. Although we have employed reflexivity to lessen the personal bias. That's why the results cannot be generalized to the broader feminist activism in Pakistan.

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