

POLITICS OF AURAT MARCH: A GENDERED NEO-LIBERALIST INSIGHT INTO INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATION IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the discourse used in the 'Aurat March' celebrations in observance to International Women's Day on March 9, 2019 in Karachi and Lahore, the major cities of Pakistan. Western post feminism has immersed into social and cultural norms of contemporary Pakistani society. Theoretically grounded in Gill's (2006) concept of 'gendered neo liberalism' and Cixous 'The laugh of the Medusa', a qualitative enquiry into the selected posters hoisted in Aurat March procession highlights relevance of the march to the changing context influenced by strong opposing direction followed by Pakistani women. Such a deviation has led them to associate their situation to gendered neo-liberalism, a power exercise to seize the political rights of women. A critical thematic analysis of the slogans exposes the effectiveness of the posters on target group to foster new identities. The study concludes that instead of getting hold of political rights, the activism has greatly endangered women by foregrounding their bodies as 'objects' ready to be consumed further. Moreover, the idea of 'sex self identification' has created a chaos in Pakistani society directly in clash with religion and culture. For future researches, this study proposes an investigation at a broader level in Pakistani context if an explicit rejection of the social and cultural structures leads to bring change in the status of Pakistani women in general or the activism holds elite class women a priority.

Keywords: Aurat March, Deviation, Activism, Post-feminism, body femininity, neo-liberalism

INTRODUCTION

'To be or not to be' has been the recurring phenomenon in Pakistani society in the context of women positioning and their status (Shakespeare 1603). At a broader canvas, KPK and Punjab government successfully took initiatives and passed the bills for the rights and protection of women (Punjab govt. Act XVI of 2016; Prevention & Protection Bill, 2019). However, to implement such legal prerogatives appear controversial. Sexual relationship between men and women had 'political nature' proliferated by mixing social, economic and religious medians (Millet, 1970).

Attitude of Pakistani society towards female in various socio-cultural contexts is complex (Tahir n.d; Kazmi, 2005; Sheikh, 2009; UNDP, 2013; Bhattacharya, 2014). Studies have shown that despite the efforts of the government, Pakistani women have been targeted in the name of religion, culture and social norms. Asian Development Bank in its July 2000 report presented portrayal of Pakistani women as 'not homogenous' due to diverse reasons such as tribal, feudal and capitalist social formations' closely interlinked to gender discrimination (p.ix). 'Gender' is valued as an organizing principle of Pakistani society' and it functions in the form of 'local traditions' (p.ix). The report highlighted 'low health' and 'education' as major factors that caused women's 'lower social, economic and cultural standing' (p.ix). The situation aroused development of National Policy to improve women's position in Pakistan. Nineteen years after the report, Pakistani society is found on the verge

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of major change under the influence of feminism; rather an outrageous wave of post- feminism in various urban regions, where women activists are raising slogans by demonstrating posters and placards on various occasions beyond the borders of equality and basic rights.

Slogans on posters and placards are a means to assert standpoints and these are studied ‘as a situated practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Gherardi, 2000, 2001; Wenger, 2000). These have been viewed as ‘social action’ (Miller, 1984; Pare & Smart, 1994) for constructing a ‘perceived value’ (Salzzi et.al, 2008). Moreover, ‘thinking capability and interaction’ are recognized as major factors within society and culture that shape individuals’ characters (Riaz & Babae, 2015, p.163). Hence, social acts, alleged values, mental capability and interconnection are interdependent for the establishment of a durable and powerful societal structure.

The present study discusses textual messages on the posters and placards displayed during Aurat March on March 8, 2019 in the backdrop of post-feminism, which in overt form is incorporated and absorbed in the societal norms of Pakistan. The study contemplates relevance of such an uptake for the changing context influenced by strong contradictory direction broadcast and promoted by Pakistani media. The situation portrays a revival of radical feminism stemming out of an explicit misogynistic attitude that has prevailed upon sub-continent for centuries. There is a need to map the growing tension and contemporary approaches of feminist supporters, who have encompassed Pakistani women life and are exercising hegemony against religion and society.

Neo-Liberalism

Contemporary aggressive female attitudes reflect a strong ‘gendered neo-liberalism’, which sustained suppression of women socially and economically by their opposite gender (Gill, 2017, p.1). The scenario relates to a higher level of inequality functioning in Pakistani society. Concept of neo-liberalism thrived a much stronger patriarchal ‘authoritarianism’ (Brunskell-Evans, 2018, para 1). Contemporary supporters of post-feminist philosophy have used neo-liberalism to their favour as a cause that functioned to uproot and diminish political identity of Pakistani women.

However, it appeared the philosophy did not seize political identity rather it harmed Pakistani women as it highlighted women bodies as ‘objects’, which could be consumed more like other material products all around the market. Secondly the thought that femininity was a social construction promoted the idea of making man into woman by exercise of femininity. Resultantly, a huge chaos has been constructed as for ‘sex self- identification’ (Brunskell-Evans, 2018, para 4).

Researchers have also pointed out language as an issue in the wake of post-feminist waves. The philosophy allowed women to use language as liberally to any extreme. Western countries have gone to the extent of providing protection to the post-feminists with regard to their liberal choice of sex-identification against historical idea of men directing women ‘how to understand and experience their bodies’ ((Brunskell-Evans, 2018, para 5).

In Pakistan also, the situation is getting alarmingly dangerous as focus groups explicitly rejected the existence of social and religious structures dominantly favouring patriarchal structures. Gill (2006) discussed post-feminism ‘as a distinct sensibility’ (p.3), which rested upon a variety of interconnected themes. The arguments led to a shift in the concept of feminism. In the past, the ‘sensibility’ was particularly associated to the increased trends in media. Scholars such as Hollows 2000, Moseley & Reed 2002 and Williamson 2003 interpreted post-feminism as ‘historical shift within feminism’ (Gill 2006, p.5).

Tabassum (2016) explored dynamics reflecting social and cultural differences in the status of men and women in the political context of Pakistan. Such a conflicting ‘distribution of political power’ resulted to formulate inequitable laws, which preferred to sustain culture and ended up in worsening the situation of Pakistani women. The discrimination appears obvious in women representation at political legislature forums. In Pakistani socio-cultural context, patriarchal domination is closely associated with politics. Moreover, relying on ‘a psychological register’ (Gill, 2008), the post-feminist movement is fostering temperament of Pakistani elite class women urging them to retaliate in the name of survival in the gendered neoliberal Pakistani society.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The present study used interpretative technique within qualitative research methodology. Qualitative interpretative method often deals with the social world and its problems. It borrows ideas from the people they study and develop new ideas with an aim to discover the occurrence and underlying motives

of social phenomena (Neuman, 1999, p. 145). It also structures a 'more conclusive research' (Singh, 2007, p.64). Hence, the aim of the present research was to disclose the meaning making practice constructed through Aurat March demonstration. From that perspective, the study considered post-feminism as a crucial social phenomenon absorbing social and cultural norms of contemporary Pakistani society. The method led to the research findings supporting the initial research question set for the study.

Notion of post-feminism worked 'as orienting device' to adopt possible ways of inquiry and formulation of a comprehensive framework required for the analysis of selected data in specific context (Layder, 1998, p.36). The present study investigated placards displayed in International Women's Day celebration in collaboration with Tehreek-e-e Niswaan and NGO to support women in the major cities of Pakistan on March 8, 2019. The study used Gill (2006) concept of gendered neo liberalism and Cixous' model paper 'The Laugh of Medusa' as its conceptual framework (1976) as after two decades Cixous perspective has gained momentum in the social and political context of Pakistan. Selection of sample was purposive and the study took 45 posters and placards (demonstrated during the rally) specifically written in Urdu from internet. The criterion for selecting Urdu language posters and placards was the impact that national language might easily create on the target audience. A textual analysis of the messages exposed the effectiveness of posters in fostering new identities. Interpretative method helped in the assessment of trends and possible contradictions prevalent in data. The study structured its analysis within the 3 categories formed from Cixous theory to be used as conceptual framework. It categorized the entire concept into 'erogeneity', 'I write woman', 'New Woman'. The selected posters displayed on the Aurat-March celebration were analyzed to see if Cixous argument held truth for Pakistani women in 2019.

Concept of Femininity

The selected posters from March 8,2019 event in Pakistan on observance of International Women Day are designed for a target group, which has conceptualized the so-called Western slogans of women pre-occupation with the body. Often defined as 'bodily property', femininity has remained a significant debate. Female body has been regarded as the most powerful weapon of women and it has constructed the largest content developing post-feministic strand and intense misogynist attitudes across different cultures.

Though the concept of femininity was worth struggling, yet the term post-feminism was blurred as it did not receive acceptance in every culture. What has given rise to debate after the Aurat March was its interpretation into post feminist paradigm. Post-feminism has been considered as an analytical concept that characterizes the contemporary women.

Emerging Generation Gap

The prospect of generation gap arising out of multiple social, economic, religious and cultural situations has developed into disturbance and chaos. Censoring bodies implies restricted to breathe and speak freely (Cixous, 1976, p.8). Though Pakistani women have not gone to the extent of using their bodies as shield to claim rights of equality, however, in the recent years we found instances such as Pakistani actresses Veena Malik and Qandeel Baloch who overtly showed and exploited men by the power of eroticism. Eroticism is the power to arouse sexual feelings ((Davon, 2014). The 'sexual silence' is silenced in the contemporary world (Perel, 2016, para, 5). Likewise, placards selected from the Aurat March demonstration invoked thoughts that imitated western perception of feminism. The placards reflected that 'institutionalized norms of womanhood' in Pakistan required 'rewriting' (Cixous, 1976, p.8). The entire event on the International Women Day showcased Pakistani women thoughts reflecting retaliation against body oppression, which holds a paramount place to the philosophy of liberation in the discourse of post-feminism.

'Erogenicity'

Erogenicity was best defined by Cixous feelings 'secretly haunting' women 'since early childhood' (p.876). Female body is controlled and used as a commodity. The slogans on the selected placards signified Cixous' thoughts that established the concept of women writing speaking boldly about their 'erogeneity' (Cohen &Cohen, 2007, p.876). The world she is searching was founded on the basis of 'experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation' (Cohen &Cohen,

2007, p.876). The selected placards said ‘ye lo beth gae sahhe se’ (Isn’t it the right position to sit?), Make up kr k khud ko dikhao (Show off your make over), Ager meri nose ring slutty hey tumhare dimagh main tutti hey (If my nose ring is slutty, your brain is shitty), Shadi k ilawa both kaam hain (Much to do apart from marriage). All such slogans and many more, are quoted to argue the Pakistani women mindset, particularly from elite class who are encouraging and promoting to speak freely about sex and feminine body. The situation gets quite morbid when such thoughts are proclaimed on the roads and media overtly. It appeared as if women during the celebration of Aurat March ‘wish[ed] to proclaim [the] unique empire’ of erogeneity for a specific reason to orient other women echoing ‘my body knows unheard-of-songs’ (Cixous, 1976 cited in Cohen &Cohen, 2007, p.876).

The demonstration supported Cixous’s perspective of men being responsible for shattering women and making them worst enemies of one another. The placard appeared to assert that their ‘bodies’ were ‘heard’ (Cixous, 1976 cited in Cohen &Cohen, 2007, p.880). Pakistani women protestors seemed Cixous’s New Women fighting as ‘weapons’ in the political process of Pakistan (Cixous, 1976 cited in Cohen &Cohen, 2007, p.880). It was a transgression from conventionality that they spoke loudly supporting ‘the logic’ of their ‘speech’ in public disturbing the ‘deaf male ear’ (Cixous, 1976 cited in Cohen &Cohen, 2007, p.881). However, in doing so, they crossed every social, cultural and religious boundary.

Social boundaries are not the same worldwide. Boundaries are strong social mechanism which may be transformed but not altogether eliminated. Post-feminist thoughts have urged females around the world to eliminate the existing order, which instead of perpetuating benefit for the society created chaos and anarchy resulting into negative intellectual as well as community development. Supporting body femininity may transform the society into animalistic existence. It also constructs ‘complex social, cultural and political’ sexual identity (Atwood, 2005). The slogans in the Aurat March functioned in different ways, which depended on the context and proved to be the source of knowledge and ‘intimate practice’ (Atwood, 2005).

What is Islamic perspective of learning and sharing sexual education? ‘Restrictive sexual standards’ have become focus of attention and are ‘idealised’ due to the contemporary ‘radicalisation of Islam’ (Dialmy, 2010). Islam offers a certain way that integrates values and traditions to live a healthy life. Discrepancy in cultural and religious standards invokes differing ideas and attitudes (Rawson & Liamputtong, 2010). Living in different cultures, individuals adopt differing behaviours to express their sexuality. Islam teaches to speak freely, however, to ‘speak in a civilized manner in a language that is recognized by the society and is commonly used’ (Al-Qur’an-4:5).

Slogans during the celebration of Aurat March in no way reflected decorum and modesty that Quran urges to be observed by both men and women. At every step it urges its followers to keep their ‘gazes lowered devoid of any lecherous leers and salacious stares’ (Al-Qur’an-24:30-31, 40:19). Muslim communities at larger scale discourage free mixing of the sexes particularly adults; however, contemporary trend in Pakistan where majority is the Muslim community, follow western thoughts to speak and interact freely. Cixous’s perspective might have been valid for western society but for the Muslim majority country such as Pakistan, the thought arise confusion and resentment rather than bringing a change in the overall vision of society.

‘I Write Women’

Pakistani society being conservative, patriarchal and religious to its core repudiated the situation by equating all the women into one box. Like Cixous, every Pakistani women wishes to ‘write’ and explain herself provided she is surrounded by a liberal and secular society such as western and American where women broke every norm even at the expense of her body. Our social and religious institutions never permit women to describe her-self as explicitly as demonstrated during Aurat March.

Participants of Aurat March conformed to Cixous’ concept that women was kept in the dark about her own self and was made embarrassed of what actually could have been her strength. What women have been practicing in the west encouraged and inspired women in East to follow. The question is if the pursuance is blind or a considerate one? The writing stage of women about her body and what Cixous called ‘luminous torrents’ and ‘drives’ have still to be proclaimed by Pakistani women (Cixous, 1976 cited in Cohen &Cohen, 2007, p.876). Although short story writers such as Asmat Chghtai, Khadija Mastoor, Hajira Masroor and Rashid Jahan endeavoured successfully challenging the conventions by announcing and discussing homo-sexual affairs in their writings. Even political activist

and scholar Sarah Suleri documented her personal experiences in fiction, which developed her as a rational powerful woman in Pakistan recording her personal experiences explicitly as well as in the form of allegories. However, none can be quoted in agreement and conformity to Cixous's thoughts (Riaz, 2016, p.60).

Aurat March explicitly highlighted an explosion of thoughts through posters. 'Main lollipop nahi, aurat hun' (I ain't a lollipop but a woman), Dicky pics apny paas rakho (keep vulgar pics along yourself). Such strong and outrageous language expressions depict an implied agenda that might have encouraged women to explode in the name of liberalism. A Muslim and Pakistani woman is bound to observe control over her word. Language norms do not pertain to Pakistani or Muslim culture, but are the pre-requisites of every culture. Researchers have found that Muslims mostly find themselves guilty due to sexual anxiety (Ali-Faisal, 2016). Liberal sexual attitudes of Muslim men and women could be found in western societies, however, in Pakistani society it would be a luxury at the risk of religious, social and moral values that could be afforded only by elite class particularly when it comes to women.

Demonstration of Aurat march showed Pakistani women negotiating their sexual space and identity. Such attitudes also reflected their less fear of harsh self-judgement as well as judgement from others. The reason might be an exposure to world writings and sex education. However, such attitudes might prove detrimental to individual as well as family life structure and Pakistani society may also end in a nuclear family or would denounce the concept of marriage at all.

Cixous asked women to write, which they had abandoned or ignored the way they did away with their bodies. Aurat March slogans demonstrated that Pakistani women not only used language but started their bodies for defence as well. It appeared Pakistani women poured out all the venom they had contained for years. 'Nazr teri gandi aur parda main karun' (control your gaze), 'Khana khud garam karna seekh lya' (did you learn to serve yourself food). The choice of 'binary language' by the women participants permits them to write and view themselves 'as the standard' (Rodgers, 2017, p. 29). The language on the posters reflected an extreme misogynist attitude framed in feminist terms. Almost every poster reflects women thoughts that they are retaliating because they are exploited. Exploitation in itself can be defined as a complex thought and such a composite demonstration echoes an attempt to communicate the information about women situation in Pakistani society.

Undoubtedly, harassment has remained a global issue happening particularly at workplaces, street, bus stop, and at home as well (Thacker & Ferris, 1991). Societies regard it as 'a social problem' (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Dziech & Weiner, 1984; Matlin, 1993; Pattinson, 1991; York, 1989). It develops more when voices are silenced (Dey, 2013). However, the solution is strict implementation of legal rules. If Pakistani women would start crying holding obscene banners and posters in their hands, the situation will worsen and we have experienced it as the consequences of Aurat March reduced dignity and modesty of Pakistani women.

'New Woman'

Sarah Grand used the term 'new woman' referring to self-determining and self-governing women in the pursuit of radical transformation (Ledger, 1997). The term established the perspective that a New Woman was capable to endure a divorce and could sustain her economic independence unharmed. Moreover, a trend was set that allowed an increasing number of divorced women to remarry. However, it remained difficult to maintain social respectability as well as to exercise legal rights and new woman was judged to be immoral thus challenging her. Vorse explained the situation as 'trying for nothing so hard in [her] own personal life as how not to be respectable when married' (Lavender, 1998). Aurat March celebrations clearly announced and agreed to similar concepts demonstrating posters saying 'Divorce happy' and 'arrange marriages', 'meri shadi ki nahi aazadi ki fikr karo' (think about my freedom not marriage). To establish sexual relationships without a legal contract is a sin in Islam (safah, laysa bi-nikah) (Arabi, 2001). Allah has announce women to be the 'Leebas (i.e. body cover, or screen, or Sakan, (i.e. you enjoy the pleasure of living with her), for you and you are the same the same for them' (Al-Quran, 2:187). In such a society, outrageous acts to demonstrate freedom of clothes show the complex on part of the Pakistan women activists and their followers. It might be asserted that Pakistani women have deviated from their religious and cultural values. Almost all the religions agree that when Adam and Eve transgressed the commands of Allah, the first thing happening to them was their uncovered bodies that startled and embarrassed them in front of each other though they were in a relationship. On seeking forgiveness, Allah ordered them to use tree branches and leaves as clothes. If

at the time of creation, such values were observed, it is ghastly seeing contemporary women, more specifically Pakistani Muslim women challenging and shattering the conventions. As a matter of fact, women have idealized men and they asked not for equality only but have attempted to imitate men in every respect. A sound example is Iranian American philosopher Amina Wadood who has started leading the prayers in American mosques. It illustrates complete deviation or transgression of Muslim women and sets an example for women to follow by the contemporary liberal individuals and groups.

New women commemorated female sexuality by emphasizing women's sex rights. They outlawed by considering sex free of any legal boundaries such as marriage. Sex appealed to new women's desires to confront conventional norms. They found personal sexual affairs perilous and exhilarating. However, it remained in dust what they meant by women's sex rights until and unless the essential acknowledgement of 'women's erotic drives' (Lavender, 1998, p.3). Slogans displayed on placards in Aurat March procession condemned traditional concept of marriage as expected, emotionally unproductive, and most of all subject to male tyranny. Shadi k ilawa both kaam hain (Much to do apart from marriage), han or na khney ki aazadi, ly k rahengy aazadi (will fight for freedom for choice) 'khana main garm kardungi bistar khud garm karo' (I will serve you food, take care of your bed). Such thoughts pertain to sex before marriage, which is haram (a sin) in Islam. It leads to relate sex before marriage with powerful notions of the standards for virginity.

Aurat march further demonstrated that Pakistani women must be liberated to exercise their sexuality and such an exercise demands they must control their reproductive ability without the intrusion of men or the government. The birth control right is connected with the leading ideas of new feminism; 'economic and sexual independence' (Lavender, 1998, p.4). Aurat march projected slogans such as 'stop being menstrual phobic', 'my body is not your battleground'. The entire women folk in Pakistan paid the cost for what the participants of Aurat March demonstrated.

Although this march was in the form of social activity with a purpose to perpetuate benefit to Pakistani women, however, it refused to follow social norms and therefore, turned out to be a disaster for the women in Pakistan. It provided men folk yet another justification to prove women outlandish creatures as Pakistan is a society where even men avoid slogans the way Aurat March projected in writing. Though Pakistani men are habitual of abusing and denouncing women for their bodies, characters and spirits, yet our religion itself imposes obligations on both the sexes and if one violates, it does not permit the other to do the same. Pakistani women can remain 'new' by being her adherence to Islamic principles and slogans on the day of Aurat march reflected refusal of women not only of social values but religion as well. Religious deliberation remains a massive influence on believers' vision concerning sexuality (Dekker & Ester, 1993, Hertel & Hughes 1987).

Where religion asks Muslim women to cover their bodies to avoid sexual assaults, Aurat march posters evoked women for clothes of their own choice; 'mery kaprey meri marzi'. The connotation conflicts what their religion and the Holy book asks them to do. Their logics being they were buried fourteen years ago and the same is practiced in one way or the other. Islam denounces brutality against women and condemns violence; however, it provides 'covering' as a solution against sexual violence. Why women should expose themselves to be prey to violent gaze? Supporters of the Aurat March must decide to live in Pakistani society according to its norms or declare themselves as secular and banish.

Self-Sustained, Educated and Unconventional Woman Portrayal

Previous studies analysed the position of Pakistani women in contemporary era and had consensus upon their underprivileged and deprived status, however, the present study found relevance of Aurat March celebration more in conformity to the western concepts of post-feminism. It was explicitly inclined to promote a self-sustained, educated and unconventional woman portrayal who is uninterested in marriage and children and threatens the conventional ideas of womanhood in Pakistani society. The study identified Aurat March for replicating Cixous' thoughts by upholding slogans such as 'mery kapry mei merzi', 'khana main garm kardungi bistar khud garm karo'. Unlike the previous Pakistani women spokespersons, the demonstration demanded an entirely blatant sexual freedom explicitly discussed and announced by the contemporary elite class women in Pakistan following the footprints of western women. Though the new perspective endangered the established view of masculinity, such radical changes in the behaviours of Pakistani women aroused indignation among their male counterparts as well as those women who find it unacceptable to compromise their religious, moral and social values. The study also found that Aurat March was majorly denounced for deserting tradition

and the increasingly manly nature of Pakistani women. It also provided a justification to the flag holders of patriarchy that if given freedom, women goes beyond the social and cultural boundaries risking their dignity at the risk of so-called body femininity. It thereby, confirmed that in a conservative and conventional society such as Pakistan an unequivocal denial of the social and cultural structures leads to worsen the status of Pakistani women in general.

The study established that promotion of post-feminist ideas such as erogeneity, writing about erotic experiences for self-discovery led women to establish homosexual affairs. Loving other women was sought as a possibility to escape male domination. Moreover, Capitalism was also found to be exploiting and constructing a chain for desire. Therefore, the uncontrolled slogans imply 'commodification' of feminine bodies. The study highlighted that women who audaciously defied customary feminine principles were instantly victimized. Class was equally significant to be considered a prime issue of post- feminism.

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated western concept of post-feminism endeavouring to absorb social and cultural norms of contemporary Pakistani society. The study concludes that Pakistani women when deviate from their religious, social and cultural norms; however, they are not offered any encouragement or acceptability. Either they would exclude themselves from such a society or live a moderate life according to religion and culture. There is no doubt saying that Pakistani culture have been suppressing women in the name of religion and norms and there is a need to introduce and refine a system that was revealed to our prophet (SAW) fifteen centuries before, which ensured women all their claims. Extremism in any way is detrimental and would damage the cause that women are fighting for. Women through such outrageous movement are quite often prey to more illegal practices such as turning to other women for consolation and love and valuing their profound emotional relationships with the same sex. Moreover, they cannot do away from men and in some respects wish to be like men, at the same time they want to develop the concept of womanhood so that impulsiveness and change within a sex can be proclaimed. Instead of getting hold of political rights, the activism has greatly endangered women by foregrounding their bodies as 'objects' ready to be consumed more.

Future Recommendations

An extensive case study can be conducted to analyze the stance promoted by Pakistani women activists. Moreover, a comparative study of western women and Pakistani women within the exclusive religious backdrop may lead to a more comprehensive understanding of female status in Pakistan.

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