



MORAL INNOCENCE AND POLITICAL PRAGMATISM: THE SELECTIVE VISIBILITY OF PAKISTANI WOMEN IN GLOBAL FEMINIST DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

*This research explored the ways in which Pakistani womanhood is created by global feminist and human-rights discourses in terms of regimes of selective visibility that favour the moral innocence against political expediency and institutional agency. In a comparative textual and discourse analysis of *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai and *Daughter of the East* by Benazir Bhutto, the research paper shows that transnational feminist discourse disproportionately extends women's victimhood and moral uprightness, making their power, compromise, and statecraft less visible in the global arrangements of visibility. Based on postcolonial feminist theory, discourse analysis, and studies of silence and absence, the article theorises absence as a non-random absence but rather as an organised phenomenon of discursive effectivity caused by unequal relations of power, which govern intelligibility, legitimacy, and moral acceptability. It is analysed that whereas the story of Malala is universally popularised with the help of a humanitarian grammar depoliticising the agency, the story on the topic of female political leadership by Bhutto is relatively mute or restructured because it is implicated in power, governance, and ambiguity. This study tackles the mainstream feminist theories that confuse empowerment with innocence through its foregrounding of the politics of visibility and erasure, and prefers a broader definition of women's agency to incorporate all aspects of negotiation and compromise and institutional power in postcolonial society.*

Keywords: #postcolonial feminism, #representation, #Pakistani women, #political leadership, #moral innocence, #discourse, #absence

INTRODUCTION

Transnational feminist and human-rights discourses have gradually made global images of Pakistani women more about victimhood, rescue, and moral certitude. These discourses have spread and become a dominant idea of Pakistan as the space to which women are mostly silenced, oppressed, and require outside intervention since the late twentieth century, in the form of memoirs, media reports, and advocacy campaigns (Said, 1978; Mohanty, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2013). Although these representations have helped highlight actual manifestations of gendered violence and educational inequality, it is also in this way that these representations have led to a reductive epistemology whereby truths of complexity, contradiction and indigenous representations of female agency are highly obscured (Spivak, 1988; Butler, 2004). In this representational economy, certain types of feminine subjectivity are more apparent than others. Innocent, suffering, and ethical purity are more readily told as part of global feminist imaginaries than the stories that predetermine political bargaining, accommodation, or institutional strength



(Hesford, 2011; Ticktin, 2011). Consequently, Pakistani women are mostly known not as historical or political players but as the face of victims, whose narratives are used to reaffirm the existing beliefs regarding Muslim societies (Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2013). This asymmetry poses important questions to the production of feminist legitimacy, whose voices are given greater strength in the transnational circuits of knowledge. The postcolonial feminist activists have long held that the international visibility of some women's stories is not an ahistorical product of lived experience but a product of discursive selection informed by power relationships (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988). The critique of the Third World woman by Chandra Talpade Mohanty shows how the Western feminist texts tend to create the women of the Global South as a homogenous group characterised mainly by oppression, hence, overlooking internal divisions of the women based on class, ideology, and political participation (Mohanty, 2003; Butler, 2004). This homogenization has been especially acute in the Pakistani case, with the women often being presented as passive subjects confined in culture as opposed to being members of social and political structures who actively negotiate (Shaheed, 2010; Jalal, 2018).

The prevalence of the human-rights testimonial discourse also consolidates this tendency. According to the authors of the studies on trauma and humanitarian discourse, testimonial texts are based on the appeal to emotions, moral panic, and recognisable faces of victims to enlist the support of the whole world (LaCapra, 2001; Hesford, 2011). Although such stories prove useful in creating awareness, they tend to favour individual victimisation over political action and moral innocence over political activity (Ticktin, 2011; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). As a result, when women indulge in politics where concession, scandal, and indecency are inevitable, they do not easily conform to these relational structures of identification. This conflict can be seen in the difference in how Malala Yousafzai and Benazir Bhutto were received in the world. The story of Malala and her youth, victimhood, and education activism is highly legible and collects praise among transnational feminist culture with its foundation on humanitarian notions of moral clarity and innocence (Hesford, 2011; Abu-Lughod, 2013). Benazir Bhutto, in turn, is a kind of female agency based on political pragmatism: she ruled and bargained with established power systems and had to work with the conditions of military domination, religious conservatism, and electoral democracy (Weiss, 1999; Jalal, 2018). Although historically, she was the first woman in a Muslim-majority country to hold the position of Prime Minister, Bhutto still holds a much more marginal and ambivalent place in world feminist histories. This gap indicates a broader ideology favouring the transnational feminist discourse of women being moral witnesses and not politicians. Judith Butler (2004) finds that vulnerability and precarity tend to become the realities of acknowledgement within liberal ethical discourses, and the agency that is executed by power is viewed with suspicion. In this respect, the globalisation of moral innocence functions as a punitive system, which decides what types of women's agency are viewable as legitimate and which are defined as problematic or non-existent (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Ticktin, 2011). Female political leadership in the representations of Pakistan is not only sidelined but also a structural aspect of dominant



discourses. Discourse, as Michel Foucault (1972) and Stuart Hall (1997) would have us remember, is not this act of mirroring reality; it creates it by structuring what is possible to say, remember and appreciate. The fact that the international feminist imaginaries do not feature political women, therefore, points to the more general unease with the women who challenge the victim-saviour dynamic by wielding power and making flawed political decisions (Spivak, 1988; Trouillot, 1995). The article interferes with such arguments by exploring how the global feminist and human-rights discourses reinforce moral innocence against political expediency and result in the systematic devaluation of female political leadership in Pakistan. The study is made on the basis of a comparative approach to the testimonial story of Malala Yousafzai and the political self-representations of Benazir Bhutto, in which the world recognises Pakistani women not through the diversity of their experiences but ideologically through the trans national discourse requirements. Through foregrounding missing accounts of political action, the article aims at complicating the prevailing accounts and adding to a more historically contextualised and politically subtle vision of Pakistani womanhood (Mohanty, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Jalal, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The approaches to representations of Pakistani women through scholarship have been largely determined by postcolonial feminist critiques of the ways women of the Global South are made intelligible by Western epistemological paradigms. In his early preliminary work, Edward Said (1978) showed the ways in which the Orientalist discourse constructs the East as culturally incomplete and morally inert, and this has since been applied by feminist scholars to challenge the gendered representations. In this paradigm, Muslim women tend to become the images of backward culture instead of historically placed actors supporting the civilizational dichotomy of the liberated West and oppressed East (Said, 1978; Mohanty, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

The homogenization of the Third World woman, as criticised by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, is still at the centre of the analysis of the representation of Pakistani women in the world feminist arena. Mohanty (2003) holds that the Western feminist discourses have a history of grouping different experiences into a single form of victimhood where class, geographical location, politicality, and ideological orientation are obliterated. This paradigm is especially applied to the image of Pakistani women when gender oppression is frequently removed from historical, geopolitical and institutional context, which results in what Mohanty refers to as a discursive colonisation of female life (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988; Butler, 2004).

The politics of representation is further complicated with the search for the subaltern speech by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. By posing the question about whether the subaltern is a speaker, Spivak (1988) highlights the role of the mediating structures, academic, political and economic, which regulate the voices that are heard and those that remain silent. Used on Pakistani women, it implies that the ability to be seen in global discourse is not an outcome of experience but the consequence of being oriented to dominant ways of telling narratives. Those voices which fit within humanitarian discourses of innocence and suffering go viral, with those voices which espouse political



complexity or institutional power being marginalised (Spivak, 1988; Trouillot, 1995; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015).

Human-rights studies have also helped to shed light on the role of testimonial accounts as a hegemonic form of the representation of women in conflict-prone areas. According to Hesford (2011) and Ticktin (2011), the humanitarian discourse has made use of affective narratives where empathy is mobilised via suffering and ethical clarity. These stories rely on familiar tropes of victimhood and rescue at the expense of structuralism and political agency. This has played a role in an imaginary economy where women are mostly victims of culture but not agents in the political struggle within the Pakistani environment (Hesford, 2011; LaCapra, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

The popularity of testimonial victimhood has major consequences for feminist representation. According to Judith Butler (2004), vulnerability turns into the location of a political identity, but this is unequally distributed and limited in an ideological way. The women who represent innocence and precarity are the ones who are easily recognised compared to those who indulge in power, governance, or compromise. This is one of the reasons why there are fewer female heads of state in feminist cultural analysis than younger, ethically faultless activists, even though other figures connected to political pragmatism, like Amanda Gonzalez Castro, who became the first black female president of a Central American nation in 1944, are more visible (Butler, 2004; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Ticktin, 2011). The study of Pakistani feminism itself is an entirely different scenario compared to the representations worldwide. The works of Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987), Shaheed (2010), and Jalal (2018) bear the record of women's political activism, legal activism, and protest movements in Pakistan, especially under dictatorial rule. Such writings are less focused on moral heroism at an individual level and more on collective struggle, institutional involvement and strategic negotiation. Nevertheless, these locally based feminist histories do not often become the subject of transnational feminist canons, pointing to a gap between perceived political action and international presence (Shaheed, 2010; Jalal, 2018; Mohanty, 2003).

Benazir Bhutto holds an ambiguous place in this academic environment. The political historians and scholars of South Asian studies attribute her to be an influential, but unappreciated, figure who skillfully manoeuvred around the military supremacy, patriarchal politics, and political frailty (Weiss, 1999; Jalal, 2018). Her leadership defies belief regarding the political incompetence of Muslim women, but studies of feminist literature and culture have mostly resisted a grounding and long-term focus on her self-representation. It is an evasion of a wider fear of women who wield power in an imperfect way since their stories can not be reduced to morality (Weiss, 1999; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Mahmood, 2005). The existing work by Saba Mahmood on the issue of agency in the context of religion adds additional instability to the assumptions of liberal feminism regarding empowerment. Mahmood (2005) holds that agency should not be reduced to simply resistance to norms but rather should be interpreted in the ethical and political contexts in which women operate. When projected onto Pakistani women, this approach makes it difficult to tell the story of liberation in Westernised terms of secular education or the discourse of human rights. It also offers a prism through which one can consider political agency, such as that of Bhutto, as an expression of ethical action, and not as a derogation of feminist principles (Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Butler, 2004).

Michel Foucault (1972) and Stuart Hall (1997) are also some of the theorists in discourse analysis who shed more light on the way narratives gain dominance. In this perspective, however, representation is not reflective, but productive; representation creates reality by prioritising some meanings at the expense of others. The lack of feminist political leadership in the world's feminist discourses concerning Pakistan can, therefore, be taken as a discursive impact and not an accidental exclusion. Power relations influence what can be said, and they promote an affective clarity in a manner that discourages political ambiguity (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997; Trouillot, 1995).

Trouillot (1995) has a concept of silence as historical production that is quite helpful in the analysis of absent narratives. Trouillot states that there are various points at which silences join history, such as the



making of sources, archives and narratives. The silence of political leadership among Pakistani women in the case is not a sign that it does not exist, but an act which disrupts the prevailing structures of feminist legibility. Governing women make the moral economy of victimhood more difficult to digest, and they are less congruent with humanitarian narration (Trouillot, 1995; Spivak, 1988; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015).

Feminist critiques of recent times have demanded that women's participation in the institutions, governance, and state power be attended to. According to Cornwall and Rivas (2015), the discourse of empowerment has been depoliticised, which concentrates on capacity-building on an individual level and not on political change. This comment is quite familiar to the Pakistani environment, in which female leadership has traditionally been concerned not with symbolic opposition but with mediation with firmly-established power formations (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Jalal, 2018; Shaheed, 2010). Combined, the literature has shown that there is a huge disparity in the global feminist images of Pakistani women and the histories of female political agency. Although testimonial narratives have enabled the public to see some of the sufferings, women who act within political institutions and power networks have been erased, as well. This has placed the current research in that gap by making the argument that feminist legitimacy is constructed using a rather different method and that political pragmatism is left out in the narratives of Pakistan across the world (Mohanty, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Spivak, 1988).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is based on a synthesised theoretical approach that relies on the postcolonial feminist theory, discourse studies, and silence/absence studies to question the politics of representation of Pakistani women in the global distributed narratives. Instead of viewing representation as an objective reflection of lived realities, this model views representation as a discursive practice that is influenced by power, ideology and epistemological authority (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997). These practices together make it possible to critically analyse how some types of agencies of women are made visible, and others, like the political pragmatism, are systematically marginalised. A postcolonial feminist approach offers a main analytical perspective of the construction of gendered subjects of the Global South in Western knowledge systems. The critique that Chandra Talpade Mohanty presents against the Western feminist discourse reveals that there is often a portrayal of women in the postcolonial setting as a homogenised group that is characterised by oppression, cultural backwardness, and agency. (Mohanty, 2003). The framework is especially applicable to the images of Pakistani women who are frequently depicted as the passive victims, in need of salvation instead of historically-figured agents who have to make actions amid complicated political and social realities (Mohanty, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

The domain is further complicated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's meddling in this issue by foreshadowing the issue of voice and mediation. In raising the question of whether the subaltern can speak, Spivak (1988) stresses that the question of representation is always negotiated by institutional, linguistic, and ideological formations that define the voice heard and in what circumstances. In the case of this research, Spivak's framework brings to the surface the articulation of some female voices in world discourses, especially those that conform to humanitarian and liberal feminist ideologies, and the silence of others, which expresses power, conflict and politics (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003). In this way, visibility does not merely happen to be an effect of experience but rather, a discursive compatibility.

This study can make use of discourse analysis that relies on the concept of discourse as a system developed by Michel Foucault in his view that discourse creates knowledge and governs meaning (Foucault, 1972). To Foucault, discourse is not only about reality, but it constitutes subjects, truth and norms. This awareness is essential to the way the narratives of Pakistani



women come to have a privilege in world feminist and human-rights discourses, and other narratives become peripheral or even unreadable (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997).

This approach is further reinforced by Stuart Hall's work on representation because it lays stress on the fact that meaning is constructed on the process of selection, repetition and exclusion (Hall, 1997). In this sense, the prevalence of victim-based narratives cannot be considered as an accident but rather the consequence of discursive regimes, which apply to emotional legibility and moral clarity. Discourse analysis, therefore, helps the research to trace the way in which moral innocence can be normalised as the dominant form of feminist legitimacy in which the narratives of women in Pakistan are received around the world (Hall, 1997; Butler, 2004).

The key element of this framework is the notion of absence that is not seen in this paper as a gap or oversight but as a discursive production. Michel-Rolph Trouillot believes that power does not act merely by what is spoken but also by what is excluded at different points of the formation of narratives, whether it is the creation of sources and archives and meaning (Trouillot, 1995). In this respect, silence is a methodological point of beginning to comprehend how some histories, such as female political leadership, are systematically removed from dominant narratives (Trouillot, 1995; Spivak, 1988). In this context, silence is an indicator of power relations that dictate which types of female agency can be regarded as legitimate, visible, and circulable. This is because the world feminist's feminist discourse on Pakistan lacks a global presence of women with political involvement in the way they engage in discussion, as it is an ideologically uneasy presence of women wielding power instead of suffering. Silence turns, therefore, into a control mechanism, which supports normative demands of femininity of vulnerability over power (Butler, 2004; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015).

Precarity and recognition written by Judith Butler are another layer that adds to the conceptual understanding of this dynamic. According to Butler (2004), vulnerability in a liberalist approach often operates as a prerequisite to ethical consideration, whereas agency, which is executed by means of power, is always suspect. In the context of feminism, this brings about the ranking of female subjectivities, with the more morally innocent victims being easily glorified as compared to those who are politically expedient. This understanding is essential in examining why stories that are driven by government, compromise, and institutional involvement are extremely hard to find feminist acceptable (Butler, 2004; Ticktin, 2011).

Lastly, the critique of empowerment discourse by Cornwall and Rivas highlights the depoliticisation of feminist narratives by focusing on how to change an individual and not a group of people (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). Their paradigm assists in putting the current research subject on political pragmatism in its context as a redress to the prevalent feminist discourses that focus on symbolic opposition rather than structural interaction.

Collectively, the postcolonial feminist theory, discourse analysis, and silence/ absence studies can offer a strong analytic tool to study how moral innocence and political pragmatism act as antagonistic ways of representing female characters. This combined methodology will allow the research to go beyond the personal accounts and to the level of structural analysis of the discursive production of world discourses on Pakistani womanhood (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988; Trouillot, 1995).

ANALYSIS

Narrative Positioning and the Production of Female Agency

In *I Am Malala*, the agency of women is built on the basis of moral witnessing, which is determined by vulnerability, youth, and clear morals. Malala constantly positions herself as a child who wanted to get an education but was met with unreasonable violence, and now, innocence is the source of power (Yousafzai and Lamb, 2013, pp. 31-33). In the memoir, she



even mentions at the beginning that we were scared, but we did not remain silent (p. 32), a line that instantly places resistance as something extraordinary and not a routine behaviour. This plot device adds up the agency in one individual, and it implicitly depicts other girls in Pakistan as mostly silent and powerless (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988).

In comparison with it, *Daughter of the East* locates agency in the sphere of political succession and institutional conflict. Bhutto does not present her decision to become a politician as a moral duty, but rather a historical one, which was determined by the family, the imprisonment and the violence in the state (Bhutto, 1988, pp. 41-45). She directly disapproves of innocence as a political virtue because, in her writing, she wrote that politics is not about saints (p. 58). In this case, agency cannot be discussed without power, compromise, and risk, which is a principal contrast to humanitarian notions of feminist representation (Butler, 2004; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015).

Moral Innocence as Discursive Capital of I Am Malala

In *I Am Malala*, moral innocence is used as the key discursive tool. In the memoir, Malala is described as very young and ethically innocent on numerous occasions, especially when she is being threatened by the Taliban troops and when she, finally, becomes a victim of the assault (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, pp. 139-142). The scene of shooting is told in the moral binary of good/evil, ignorance/enlightenment, so there is not much political complexity or structure on which to analyse the scene (pp. 145-147). This framing of narrative is very much consistent with what Hesford (2011) defines as the spectacular rhetoric of the human-rights testimony.

The opposition in the memoir is much personalised. Even though Malala shows the names of her peers who are afraid to go to school, these are nameless and voiceless people since their existence is mostly based on her moral authority (Youseafzai and Lamb, 2013, pp. 44-46). This plot device supports Mohanty (2003) in her criticism of the construction of Third World women as a group of victimised women who need to be represented. Agency is infrequent, delicate and extraordinary, but not structural or collective (Ticktin, 2011).

Daughter of the East Political Pragmatism and the Refusal of Innocence

Bhutto clearly rebuffs the moral economy of innocence in *Daughter of the East*. Her story of the suffering under Zia-ul-Haq lays stress on survival and math as opposed to moral cleansing (Bhutto, 1988, pp. 96-102). She explains that it was the confinement that taught her discipline, patience and political clarity rather than martyrdom (p. 101). It is not victimising but instrumental suffering that strengthens a model of agency based on **pragmatism and not victimhood (Mahmood, 2005)**.

This difference is further demonstrated by the negotiations that Bhutto used with male political elites. In an account of her meetings with military leaders and heads of her party, she constantly stresses the issue of compromise as a survival tactic and not as a sign of moral deficiency (Bhutto, 1988, pp. 172-176). In contrast to the story of Malala, which places politics as an externality to the female agency, Bhutto places political manipulation as the location of feminist conflict (Weiss, 1999; Jalal, 2018).



Feminine and Masculine National Representation

The representation of Pakistan in *I Am Malala* is often based on fear, silence, and gendered oppression, especially in the part where Swat is under the Taliban control (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, pp. 87-92). The education of women is used as the main measure of national failure, which strengthens feminized vision of Pakistan as a culturally infertile country (Said, 1978; Abu-Lughod, 2013). The country seems to be more of a setting, where personal heroism comes into focus, instead of a political territory.

Contrastingly, Pakistan, under Bhutto, is a politically unstable yet historically dynamic country that was determined by constitutional crisis, military intervention, as well as democratic resistance (Bhutto, 1988, pp. 203-210). The presence of gender oppression is accepted and entrenched in larger institutional conflicts as opposed to cultural pathology. Women are portrayed as historical figures and not moral indicators of national descent (Jalal, 2018; Weiss, 1999).

Voice, Mediation, Politics of Speaking For

Even though *I Am Malala* is a first-person narration, the voice of Malala is strongly mediated with conventions of co-authorship and publishing worldwide. Her address to the global community is a reflection of the terms of liberal human-rights rhetoric focused on universal education and moral imperativeness (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, pp. 263-266). This allows her to represent Pakistani girls, instead of being in their company, which is the main issue of Spivak (1988) on representation.

Universalisation, however, is not accepted by Bhutto. She stresses severely on her high status and political privilege and mentions that her experience cannot represent all Pakistani women (Bhutto, 1988, pp. 12-14). This particularity constrains her symbolic interest at the cost of political integrity, highlighting the trade-off between representational and analytical scope (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

The Feminist Selectivity of Media Reception

The moral framing of Malala protects her against the political attack as she becomes an unreachable ethical icon in the world discourse (Yousefzai and Lamb, 2013, pp. 269-271). Bhutto, though, is always presented with controversy, insider trading, dynasty, and unmanliness, both inside and outside her story (Bhutto, 1988, pp. 279-283). Such a difference depicts feminist selectivity where innocence is an invitation to celebration and power is an invitation to suspicion (Butler, 2004; Ticktin, 2011).

Lack of Narratives and Discursive Oblivion

The fact that the Malala story is being privileged as compared to that of Bhutto has other implications. The emergence of women in leadership politics seems like an anomaly in the role of women, and the notion that their agency can only be given significance by outside authority is seen (Shaheed, 2010; Trouillot, 1995). This paper shows that the lack is not a coincidence but discursively created as part of the global trend towards moral transparency and simplicity over political ambiguity (Spivak, 1988; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015).

When this is put together, what can emerge, however, are conflicting forms of female agency: moral innocence based on testimony and political realism based on government. The continued privilege of the former, demonstrated by the whole world, is an ideological choice, and it does not take into account real facts. The identification of feminist agency in female political leadership disrupts the mainstream discourses and replaces historical colour in the images of Pakistani women (Bhutto, 1988; Yousafzai and Lamb, 2013; Jalal, 2018).



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research sets out to examine how global feminist and human-rights narratives construct Pakistani womanhood through selective visibility, privileging moral innocence while marginalising political pragmatism. The comparative analysis of *I Am Malala* and *Daughter of the East* demonstrates that the global circulation of women's narratives is governed less by representational accuracy than by discursive compatibility with dominant feminist frameworks (Mohanty, 2003; Hesford, 2011; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). The findings indicate that female agency in Pakistan is not absent in reality but rendered absent through discursive practices that favour affective clarity over political complexity.

The first key finding reveals that moral innocence functions as a primary condition of feminist recognition in transnational discourse. *I Am Malala* derives its global authority from the positioning of Malala Yousafzai as a morally unambiguous victim-survivor whose demands align seamlessly with liberal human-rights narratives (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013; Butler, 2004). This framework renders suffering legible and mobilisable, but it also consolidates agency in an exceptional figure, implicitly constructing Pakistani women as largely silent, endangered, and dependent on external advocacy (Mohanty, 2003; Ticktin, 2011). The elevation of innocence thus narrows the spectrum of acceptable female subjectivities.

The second major finding concerns the systematic marginalisation of female political leadership within global feminist narratives. Benazir Bhutto's self-representation in *Daughter of the East* articulates agency through governance, negotiation, and compromise—forms of action that disrupt the moral clarity demanded by humanitarian discourse (Bhutto, 1988; Jalal, 2018). Rather than embodying ethical purity, Bhutto presents herself as a political actor shaped by institutional constraints, historical contingencies, and ideological struggle. The relative absence of her narrative from feminist cultural analysis reveals an ideological discomfort with women who exercise power imperfectly rather than symbolising oppression (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Weiss, 1999).

A third critical finding highlights the role of discursive absence as a mechanism of power. Drawing on silence/absence studies, the analysis demonstrates that the exclusion of political women from dominant narratives is not accidental but structurally produced (Trouillot, 1995; Spivak, 1988). Female political leadership in Pakistan is rendered invisible because it challenges the victim–saviour binary that underpins much transnational feminist storytelling. Silence, in this context, operates as regulation: it limits feminist legitimacy to forms of agency that do not threaten existing ideological or geopolitical hierarchies (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997).

The research further finds that these representational dynamics contribute to a neo-Orientalist framing of Pakistan. By foregrounding gendered victimhood while marginalising indigenous political agency, global narratives risk reinforcing the perception of Pakistan as a space incapable of internal reform (Said, 1978; Abu-Lughod, 2013). This framing not only distorts national reality but also undermines recognition of long-standing feminist struggles, women's movements, and political leadership within the country (Shaheed, 2010; Jalal, 2018). The absence of such narratives sustains a discourse of dependency that privileges external intervention over local agency.

In merging these findings with the study's concluding argument, it becomes clear that the issue at stake is not the validity of individual narratives but the politics of narrative circulation. Malala Yousafzai's global visibility does not invalidate Benazir Bhutto's political significance; rather, the contrast between the two exposes the ideological limits of dominant feminist discourse. As Butler (2004) notes, vulnerability often serves as the basis for ethical recognition,



while power exercised through institutions remains suspect. This hierarchy of recognition shapes not only who is celebrated but also whose histories are remembered or forgotten.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research argues that global feminist and human-rights narratives must move beyond the privileging of moral innocence to acknowledge women as political actors embedded in historical and institutional contexts. Re-centring female political leadership in representations of Pakistan does not diminish the importance of advocacy against gendered oppression; instead, it restores analytical depth by recognising women's engagement with power, compromise, and governance. By foregrounding absent narratives of political pragmatism, this research calls for a feminist scholarship that resists simplification and embraces complexity as a necessary condition for justice (Mohanty, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

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