

Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies

Volume 24

Issue 1 *Asian Feminisms and Youth Activism:
Focus on India and Pakistan*

Article 14

11-1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Sahar, Naila (2022) "Double Bind of Muslim Women's Activism in Pakistan: Case of Malala Yousafzai and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy," *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/wagadu/vol24/iss1/14>

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CHAPTER 14

Double Bind of Muslim Women's Activism in Pakistan: Case of Malala Yousafzai and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy

Naila Sahar¹

ABSTRACT

A majority of Western² feminist studies has dealt with women from the third world as a homogenous entity of poor and passive victims without agency, who need saving and thus need to be spoken for. Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have both underscored the urgency of seeing and dealing with third world feminism in terms of a genre that is different in socio-cultural background from Western dynamics, and they emphasize the importance of being wary of the ways in which Western feminism creates the 'discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World' (Mohanty, 1991). In this paper, I am going to investigate Pakistani Muslim women activism and the ways in which these women emerge from being a benign presence in a masculinist culture to occupying spaces of resistance, challenging patriarchal notions and stereotypical images of women, and thus becoming a guiding force for other women. I argue that even when Muslim women activists struggle in their respective domains to bring the voices of women into light, they are kept imprisoned in the double bind where they are judged by patriarchy at home and are perceived as victims who need saving in the western hegemonic discourses. Malala Yousafzai and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy are globally celebrated yet are extremely controversial in their home country. Both are accused by their fellow Pakistanis of being complicit with the Western agenda of maligning Pakistan and defaming their country. This reaction points to the double bind (Spivak) that this paper aims at highlighting, namely the ways in which women's resistance to patriarchy at home is then taken up by Western media and public as a justification for imperialist surveillance and stereotypical images of these women as victims and objects to be 'saved'.

Keywords: Gendered activism, Nationalism, Resistance, Double bind

Introduction

Narratives relating to the representation of Muslim women are marked by discourses of oppression and subjugation that indicate that Muslim women are victims that need saving from radical Islam/Muslim men. While one cannot deny that such postulations about Muslim societies are partly true, most assumptions about Islam as oppressive religion are propaganda based as well. Patriarchy and misogyny in Muslim countries do run deep, but many of these discursive practices regarding gender discrimination pertain to power dynamics and are the consequence of cultural perceptions rather than religious injunction³. This paper investigates instances of two Pakistani women activists, Malala Yousafzai and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, and will attempt to unravel ways in which

these women emerge from being a benign presence in a masculinist culture to occupying spaces of resistance, challenging patriarchal notions and stereotypical images of women, and thus becoming a guiding force for other women. I also argue that even when these Pakistani women activists struggle in their respective domains to bring the voices of women into light, they are kept imprisoned in the double bind (Spivak 2011) where they are judged by patriarchy at home and are perceived as victims who need saving in the western hegemonic discourses. Seen through this lens, these two women are caught in a war of discourses which imprisons them in a double bind where their burden of decision-making remains indispensably tied with 'burden of responsibility'⁴ for the whole nation's honor and shame. Contesting these power structures that tie these women with 'burden of responsibility', this paper outlines struggles of Yousafzai and Obaid-Chinoy that help them emerge as empowered. As PM Ryder (2015) puts it, both these women rely on Western media to circulate their message as they persistently disrupt its dominant messages (176). This paper outlines the way these both women use the hegemonic power of western media to disrupt orthodox religious discourses regarding women's empowerment and offer alternative readings of the Quran that are progressive on women's issues.

Women activists are varied and diverse in both their experience and in terms of numerous other markers of their identity such as ethnicity, geographical location, immigration status, and marital status. Pakistani women activists are doubly trapped in the limiting sexist discourse of gender exclusivity and religious patriarchy and yet existing in different locales make their experiences of resistance distinct and diverse. Applying Gayatri Spivak's theory of the double bind to the condition of these women, I contend that these women are constantly imprisoned in the double bind where 'the burden of decision making is also the burden of responsibility' (Spivak 104-105) for them, which includes the responsibility of keeping intact the honor of their family, society, nation, and the whole Muslim community. The double bind becomes that existential crisis for Muslim women where despite all efforts of liberation the Muslim woman constantly finds herself struggling with the expectations and stereotypes of what it is to be a Muslim woman. This double bind imprisons them simultaneously in the Eurocentric discourse for being 'oppressed Muslim women', and in patriarchal and religious discourses at 'home,' mostly for being brash and unashamed libertines and not being Muslim 'enough'. This paper looks at the ways in which Yousafzai and Obaid-Chinoy have endeavored to reoccupy the hegemonic discourse, utilizing the liminal spaces and interstices open to them by virtue of existing in unique milieus in which to construct their identity.

Malala Yousafzai and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy are both famous worldwide for their activism and for securing prestigious awards and accolades. Where Yousafzai is the youngest Nobel prize winner, Obaid-Chinoy secured Academy awards twice for her two documentaries, *Saving Face* (2012) and *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* (2015). Yousafzai became globally famous

when she was shot in Swat, which is in northern Pakistan, after she continued her efforts to keep going to school and advocating the need for girls' education while the Taliban were against it. After getting shot in the head, she was taken to the UK for her treatment, and she has continued living there after recently having graduated from Oxford University.

While Yousafzai was born and bred in a humble household, Obeid-Chinoy grew up in more privileged circumstances in Karachi, which allowed her to attend some of the best elite educational institutions both there and abroad, including Stanford University in the United States. Where Yousafzai has been constantly struggling for girls' education on a global level, Obeid-Chinoy's award-winning documentaries talk about violence against women in Pakistan as a result of cultural and structural inequalities that are inbred in Pakistani society. Her first documentary that won the Academy award was *Saving Face*, which talks about the under-reporting of violent acid attacks against women. Her second award-winning documentary was *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*, which broaches the subject of honor killings in Pakistan. It is about the case of nineteen-year-old girl who survived an attempted honor killing by her father and uncle, and who has solid reasons not to forgive the perpetrators in the court room, yet she has to succumb to the public and societal pressures to forgive them, so the attackers are set free to return home without any repercussions for their crimes.

As has been observed in many accounts⁵ with the fall of the twin towers in September 2001, it became a challenge for Muslims around the globe to rethink their identity in relation to a world that was antagonistic to their religious affiliations. The events of 9/11 brought an unmatched amount of attention to Islam and Muslims and there was an unprecedented increase in the hatred directed toward them. In this scenario, no one suffered as much as women from Muslim countries, who were already living with the stigma and stereotype of being a veiled, docile, home bound victim. Women in countries like Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, are challenging and questioning the religious influences within their culture as the determinants of their identity and in the post 9/11 era, they are further frozen in the Eurocentric and hegemonic discourse as subjugated, repressed, and tyrannized by restrictive religious laws and Muslim patriarchy and in need of being 'saved'. Such a discourse about them is further problematic because it is based mainly on the notion of difference from a mainstream Western logic and usually ignores what these women have to say about themselves. The dilemma faced by Pakistani women is that they are either silenced by the Muslim patriarchy and restrictive laws/policies concerning women's rights in the locales they inhabit or when they dare break the silence and speak, the mainstream western media tries to distort and manipulate this discourse for their own ends. Thus, whether at home or abroad, these women have to contend with double standards that leave them with no other choice but to adapt and develop ways of expressing themselves from within a system that persists in objectifying them in every way.

Feminist debates and Women activism in Pakistan

Before dwelling on the politics and ideology of two women activists chosen for discussion here, I want to investigate why these women need to be studied in a way that is different from other Western female activists, and what the potential differences are between Islamic feminist activism and Western feminist social movements. First, the Pakistani women activists who are actively pursuing change in their home countries have lived in a distinctive position that is significantly different from situations in which women in the rest of the world, especially Western women, live. For a long time, mainstream Western feminism has avoided engaging with the difficult conditions and situations in which religious women strive to thrive and survive. Religion is seen as patriarchal and oppressive for women, and though there has been much written about women, religion, and resistance, there has been much less attention given to women, religion, and autonomy. It is important to learn how women from Muslim countries, especially those who identify as religious and do not see the dynamics of religion in relation to resistance to religion but instead feel part of the religious structure] in terms of female authority, fight for their rights. The basic difference between Muslim women's activism and Western feminist movements lies in secularizing the feminist narratives in the West that constitutes Muslim women's struggle as a site of exclusion from mainstream feminist deliberation.

Many Western feminist studies has dealt with women from the third world as a homogenous entity of poor and passive victims without agency, who need saving and thus need to be spoken for. Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have both underscored the urgency of seeing and dealing with third world feminism in terms of a genre that is different in socio-cultural background from Western dynamics, and they emphasize the importance of being wary of the ways in which Western feminism creates the 'discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World' (Mohanty, 1991). Mohanty writes in *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*: 'I argue that assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality, on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the "third world" in the context of a world system dominated by the West, on the other, characterize a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the third world' (55). Western feminist narratives' disregard for or attempt to 'recover' or 'interpret' the perspectives of third world and Islamic feminism also constitutes a commodification and fetishizing of all signifiers signifying Islam as a religion. In 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' Spivak writes about the commodification and 'worlding' of the Third World in Western imperialist critiques of the Third world, wherein the Third world emerges 'as a signifier that allows us to forget that "worlding", even as it expands the empire of the literary discipline' (269). The third world thus emerges as a distant culture, exploited but with 'rich intact literary heritages' waiting to be explored. The same trope is often applied to Muslim women and their narratives. Where Muslim women activists have been trying to repudiate and renounce traditional and stereotypical images

of women of Islam at home and around the world as weapons against their patriarchal oppression, similar images have been recreated and taken up by Western scholarship as a justification to intervene in a space that is supposedly unclaimed and need saving.

It is against this background that I will analyze Yousafzai and Obaid-Chinoy's unique position. While in Western Eurocentric narratives both these women are seen as victims who exposed depravities of patriarchal atrocities in Muslim countries, in their own country they are seen as wicked women who repudiate and renounce traditional Pakistani image of women around the world. As a result, these women are trapped in a double bind where not only are they mis-seen or un-seen by western media, but also, they are subjected to oppression and coercion by the patriarchy at home. I argue that because of such challenges at home, Yousafzai and Obaid-Chinoy's activism consists of challenging dominant religious, nationalist, and patriarchal ideologies and contesting local power structures. I will build on this argument further below.

Activism and cultural baggage

Where Yousafzai and Obaid-Chinoy have some hard-core fans in Pakistan, a majority has been accusing them of supporting the hegemonic discourses about Muslim women's victimhood that encourage the stereotypical perception of Pakistan being a regressive country. They are accused of having perpetuated Orientalist discourses about the systematic oppression of women in the Third World.

In Pakistan, Malala has become a one-word trigger for vitriolic anger and malicious suspicion. Pakistanis are split in groups where one group that supports her has the tendency to dismiss criticism of her as an example of cultural backwardness, patriarchal misogyny, religious imbecility, and tribal barbarism that is prevalent especially in Northwestern Pakistan, the other group consists of vocal critics of Malala and many of them are from her hometown. This group also consists of people who Malala symbolically championed; fathers who bore the wrath of the Taliban by allowing their daughters to attend schools, mothers who nursed injured girls beaten by the Taliban and grandparents who buried granddaughters that were blown apart on their way to school. Why is it then that they are vociferous critics of Malala? In his article *Malala: Why so many in Pakistan hate what she symbolizes* Saeed Afridi writes that after talking to such people, one realizes that their criticism may be directed at her but is seldom about her. For them Malala is not a single entity, but rather an unfortunate phenomenon and a naïve pawn in a sinister conspiracy of the West against Muslim countries and their ideology.

Gendered activism and nationalism in Pakistan have been marked by religious discourses and cultural baggage. As a result, Pakistani women end up existing in a double bind where their burden of decision-making remains indispensably tied with burden of responsibility for the whole nation's honor and shame (Spivak 2012). In Pakistan, there is general resentment against Western Eurocentric scholarship that has dealt with women from the third world as a homogenous entity of

poor and passive victims without agency, who need saving and thus need to be spoken for. In post 9/11 scenario, when Muslim women are reduced to distorted caricatures of voiceless *hijabis/niqabis* and are depicted in media as a resource in the politics of fear to encourage distrust, western narrative about Malala seemed another conspiracy theory against Pakistan. It was largely believed that attack on Malala was manipulated by her father for social mobility and was exploited by the West to support their stance about redeeming the Muslim women from religiously radicalized and oppressed Third World. Malala's father is famous for his anti-military sentiments and politically liberal ideas, and soon after Malala was shot, the Pakistani media saw the injured daughter as a pawn of her father to foster his personal ambitions.

Malala's plight fitted well with the narrative promoted by the United States and its ideological allies within Pakistan, and those who opposed promotion of liberal values saw propagation of Malala's narrative in the West as yet another US conspiracy to Westernize Pakistan. 'They cherry picked the names of Brand-Malala's advocates to highlight those with anti-Pakistan, anti-Muslim and xenophobic histories to demonstrate the validity of their suspicions' (Afridi 2018). Many in Pakistan felt that Malala's PR team was further reducing her as a puppet to the Western world by heightening public interest and media frenzy surrounding Malala and propagating brand Malala that implied carefully curated image of hers as a symbol of West's benevolence towards women who are oppressed by despotic Muslim countries. A spokesman from Edelman, which is an American public relations and marketing consultancy firm, said 'a team of five publicists were dedicated to managing the massive media and public interest in Malala's campaign. They have already issued of a two-month waiting list for an interview with her.'⁶

We can look for reasons of such dichotomous perceptions in history of Pakistani macho-nationalist ideals which regard home and the domestic sphere for women as the best guardian of the traditional values, culture, and identity. In Pakistan, women and modernity have come to be regarded as antithetical entities, with the result that the goal of national emancipation involve a betrayal of all prospect of progressive change for women (Young 2001)⁷. According to Young (2003), 'This has also meant that while women struggle with the legacies of colonialism in the postcolonial era, they are repeatedly accused of importing western ideas' (97). Moreover, development of religious nationalism in postcolonial Pakistan has actually placed women in a state comparable to that in which they found themselves during colonialism, thus putting them in a situation where while women struggle with the legacies of colonialism in the postcolonial era, they are repeatedly accused of importing western ideas. Question of women, their rights, their position and status in public and private spaces has always been an issue of concern in the state-building and Islamization of Muslim countries. Women in Pakistan have therefore become markers of political goals and sign of cultural identity during the processes of political revolutions. Where women's empowerment is becoming a focus of more significant debate, their liberation in Pakistan is seen as inimical to the nation's cultural identity. In the introduction to the book 'Gender and National Identity',

Valentine M Moghadam writes that nationalism, revolution and Islamization are gendered processes. To unravel the dynamics that intertwine the project of state-building with the question of women, Moghadam suggests we unpack the relationship between nationalism and images of women and examine the role that the 'Woman Question' (Moghadam 35) play in the discourses and programs of revolutionaries. According to her, there is a link between the consolidation of power by new states and laws about women and the question of women is integral to projects of Islamization.

Talking in the South Asian and specifically in Pakistani context, women have always been regarded as the caretaker of the domestic sphere (Samarasinghe 2000). Her primary responsibility is viewed as nurturing of children and taking care of the household chores while the men have always confined themselves to the area of dominance. Seen through this lens, Yousafzai and Obaid-Chinoy have negotiated their way through the culturally dominant ideas of femininity, and this has earned them adversaries as well.

Human rights discourses, Islamization and narrative consumerism

A general perception in Pakistan is that the Western media pounced on Malala's memoir and Sharmeen's documentaries for the emotional appeal of such narratives, and then fashioned these stories to their ultimate advantage to legitimize Western savior complex. In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Noam Chomsky proposes that the mass communication media of the U.S. 'are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, ... and without overt coercion' (96). The trope of uneducated Muslim men is thus evoked through the media as a set of othered bodies, frozen and Orientalized in the discourses that support the myth of the 'white man's burden'.⁸ Such dichotomized narratives of liberation and victimhood are then inextricably tied with dynamics of social and political economies of power and privilege or the lack thereof, and this is why the Western media's propagation of Malala's narrative and the Academy award given to Sharmeen for exposing the ills of Pakistani society are perceived by many Pakistanis as reinforcement of Western notions regarding the need for Third World emancipation, and the re-inscription of neocolonial power relations.

The reproduction and perception of the figure of the Third World woman, who leads "an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read sexually constrained) and being 'Third World' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized, etc.)" (Mohanty 1991, 56), in the narratives of Malala and Sharmeen, has put both women at the crossroads of topographies of power relations where their identity construction is being controlled either by the Western media or by patriarchy at home. They are perceived as not Muslim enough for being blatant, not women enough for being more daring than is acceptable in Pakistani culture, and they are not liberated enough for they are from the Third World.

Malala was the center of attention throughout the world after she was shot, and now she is seen as a global symbol of resistance and a proponent of girls' education. But this is not the case in her own country. In Pakistan, she is seen as someone who aided the political agenda of the West by putting Pakistan in the limelight again for being a dangerous country that is plagued by terrorists. However, one needs to question the extent to which this perception is intensified by the Western media and not by Malala herself. Just as postcolonial critics, such as Edward Said, have seen problems and limitations in Western representations of Islam and the East, feminist scholars perceive problems in condescending and patronizing representations of women from Third World countries as objects of victimization. The construction of silent, voiceless, victimized Muslim women has its roots in a time when British colonizers and missionaries were called to 'save' Muslim women from cultural and religious practices of purdah (veil) and polygamy. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes: "Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West" (21). The Orient thus represented is not real because, not being able to represent itself for the lack of subject position, the Orient is thus politically and linguistically represented by the West.

Applying Said's analysis in the context of Malala, the use of the hashtag '#IamMalala' that was initiated by Gordon Brown and then eventually used by the whole West, is a version of Malala's case being taken over by the 'savior'. In 'Hash tagging girlhood: #IamMalala, #BringBackOurGirls and gendering representations of global politics' (2016), Helen Berents writes about the ways in which social media activism, condensed into hashtags and tweets, reproduces problematic and limited concepts of girlhood in the Global South that serve to reinforce ideas about girlhood in the Global North. Through the implications of modern science and technology that empower some individuals more than others depending on the dynamics of the locales they inhabit; the internet thus situates hegemony in itself by accentuating the dichotomy between the notions of the developed North and underdeveloped South. Berents writes that as Twitter users in the Global North repeat the hashtags, they reproduce problematic relations of power 'that are intimately bound up within simplistic conceptions of girlhood. Although generous readings would say the use of the hashtag and related activism in both cases engages in solidarity and "awareness raising," there is an element of co-optation within the campaigns through the use of the claims that "I Am Malala"' (514). Seen from this perspective, it feels like subject construction of Muslim women from Pakistan is a result of Eurocentric savior complex and perpetuation of victimhood narratives about Muslim communities' inability to thrive independently. The cartoonist representations of Malala in the *New York Times* for instance, that render her walking while some disheveled, long bearded Taliban are trying to stop her⁹ can be seen as a part of a Western agenda that seeks to reduce the 'other' as regressive. Such representations become problematic since they portray a homogenous mass of Muslim bearded men in stark contrast to Malala, signifying a rift between those who cherish the ideals of civilization/ progress, and those who lack them and are signified by a particular

dress code. Shelina Khoja- Moolji (2017) writes: 'The reproduction of the Muslim world/ Orient as antagonistic to the rights of women and embroiled in premodern sensibilities is made possible through an invocation of the binary of vulnerable Muslim women and threatening Muslim men' (384).

Eurocentric discourses around brown Muslim bodies are discriminatory as their empowerment is viewed as individualized action against local cultures. According to Moolji, the research she conducted in Pakistan's villages indicates that there is a heightened sense of complementarity and interdependency in people that is employed to achieve individual as well as collective well-being. 'When living that is experienced in such complex ways is reduced to a list of rights, or to legal and state-defined definitions of what constitutes freedom, which close off other emancipatory projects, it can be read as a form of violence' (378). So, the universal language that surrounds the discourse of human rights is inadequate to explore the dynamics of lives that people are living in different parts of world, and therefore Moolji calls for 'reconstructing the human rights discourse such that it acknowledges multiple and diverse conceptualizations of what it means to be human (378). Referring to Wendy Brown's (2004) arguments on humanitarian intervention, suggesting that the state's intervention in crisis events is probably more about a 'particular form of political power carrying a particular image of justice', Moolji insists that we 'interrogate the self-articulation of human rights as an anti-political project' (380) and ask questions about the political functioning and processes of politicization of a certain event.

Fawzia Afzal-Khan also conveys the same kind of doubt concerning Eurocentric conceptualizations of narratives from third world countries, as she explains in her paper *The politics of pity and the individual heroine syndrome: Mukhtaran Mai and Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan*, when she says that, 'The reformist drama continues to be enacted on world stages... which allows audiences to both pity and then admire the objects of their pity, as long as the latter can be (re)constructed in the image of the 'ideal' citizens for our neoliberal times' (168). She questions western liberal feminism's complicity in solidifying and endorsing false universalisms and cultural essentialisms of dominant human rights debates. Feminists from the Global South have been challenging the homogenous applicability of international human rights discourses and politicization of 'women's empowerment' narratives and are asking to remain attentive to the local social contexts which reveal the tension between the universal and the particular in human rights debates. Being mindful of Elizabeth Philipose's (2008) assertion, 'It is not a question of working within the parameters of the existing systems, but of revolutionizing those systems through our advocacy and activism and creating analytics that refuse to be complicit in recolonizing the world' (114).

In her article, *The making of Humans and their Others in and through Transnational Human Rights Advocacy* (2017), Shenila Khoja-Moolji advocates decolonizing and pulverizing human rights discourse by pointing to alternative notions that are prevalent in Pakistan regarding what it means to lead a meaningful life. McDowell and Sharp argue that "gender relations are both affected

and reflected in the spatial structure of societies” (1997:4). Language of international human rights discourses cannot be applied to Malala’s narrative because there are contradictory views prevalent in Pakistan about her and her case needs to be resituated and contextualized within Pakistani socio-cultural and religious framework.

Muslim male preachers have been using the Islamic discourses of ‘modesty’ to limit women’s domain to the private spaces of home. Modesty is then clearly a gendered notion, and female modesty is a tool for the Pakistani Muslim patriarchy to control women. Debates over the Islamization of public space started in Pakistan when Zia-ul-Haq, the military dictator who ruled Pakistan for eleven years till his death, made alliances with *Jamaa’t-e-Islami*, a religious Right Islamist political party, and started radically Islamizing Pakistan in the 1980s by introducing the concept of ‘*chador aur chaardevari*’ (veil and home) regarding women.¹⁰ Moral regulation exclusive to women became a seminal part of the law in Pakistan after Zia meddled with law making and introduced policies to strengthen his illegitimate rule in Pakistan by seeking the favor of Islamists. In *The Great Arch*, Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer write that: ‘Moral regulation is coextensive with state formation, and state forms are always animated and legitimated by a particular moral ethos’ (4). As in all Muslim countries, ideas and projects of moral regulation and modesty have been interpellated in Pakistan to regard women as repositories of culture and Islamic tradition. By considering women objects that belong to ‘*chador and chaardevari*’, women are thus rendered a property of state and patriarchy that need to be morally regulated by keeping them in boundaries and restrictions and thus making them a part of the system and processes of hegemony.

Such dynamics of hegemony in Pakistan disclose the tension between gender politics and moral regulation, which shape the subjectivities of women through the discourses of Islam and nationalism. Malala and Sharmeen are very much aware of the positioning of the feminine as the property of patriarchy and have been resisting and responding to such discourses in different ways. To underscore the legitimacy of her visibility and contest her perception as a headstrong girl, Malala has constantly brought her father’s presence alongside her to public knowledge. Malala writes that her father tells her to stop relying on mullah for Qur’anic interpretations and has encouraged her to critically think: “We don’t have any option. We are dependent on these mullahs to learn the Quran,” he said. “But you just use him to learn the literal meanings of the words; don’t follow his explanations and interpretations. Only learn what God says. His words are divine messages, which you are free and independent to interpret” (70); thus, Malala grew up knowing that patriarchal interpretations of Quran have exploited the ignorance of the common masses.

Sharmeen, like Malala, doesn’t blame religion but the wrong interpretations and cultural pressures that reinforce a pattern of moral and normative regulation of women. According to her, ‘Islam had given power to women, which could be gauged from the fact that a girl was asked three times during the nikah whether she wanted to get married to that man with whom her nikah was being solemnized’ (2016). Regarding the allegations of defaming Pakistan, Sharmeen has always retort-

ed that she is showing the true face of society and her documentaries are an attempt at holding up a mirror to Pakistani men. 'If you don't like your reflection in the mirror, don't shoot the messenger. Grow up. Confront your issues. Bring about change' (2017), she reasons in her interview. Sharmeen has been accused of selling Pakistani women's miseries to a foreign audience to augment her personal wealth and fame, and it is said that the topics she chose for her documentaries were driven by sexy appeal for west, commercial oriented agendas, instead of paying attention to urgent human rights crises in Pakistan¹¹. Going through the articles written about Sharmeen by Pakistani journalists, one realizes that for mainstream Pakistanis, her Oscar award does not hold much importance. For them, her upscale upbringing and elite background almost nullify the subjects she addressed in her documentaries, since for most Pakistanis her elitist links with powerful lobbies in the US media just strengthened her image as someone who exploits sufferings of the poor. The blog post about Sharmeen titled, *Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and her Oscar do not mean much for Pakistan* has listed several suppositions about Sharmeen, and positions her as a part of powerful mafia in the Pakistani and international media while criticizing her use of English language in her documentaries as a ploy to malign Pakistan's reputation in the world. According to the writer, if Sharmeen's aim was to create awareness and bring reform within Pakistan, she would have chosen to make her documentaries in Urdu, or any other regional language of Pakistan so to expand the outreach of her constructive message to her fellow citizens. 'Compare Sharmeen Chinoy's made for English speaking audience movie to Iranian Oscar-award winner movie (A Separation) which was made in Farsi (Persian) and was made available to Iranian domestic viewers.'¹² The article also criticizes her as an elitist show off, stating that when she was asked in an interview about the dress she would wear at Oscars, she named all the top designers for her jewelry and clothing, which would be affordable only to the richest of rich in Pakistan. Because of her personal indulgences, Sharmeen is regarded as an invalid spokesperson for those women to whom she has tried to give a voice in her documentaries who mostly come from very poor families.

Conclusion

Resisting or not, women are always seen through the prism of power relations that judges their agency as subliminal. The position and situation of these two Pakistani women activists is complicated, since their speaking and breaking silence is seen as fraught with contradictions and complications. The set of challenges these women activists face and their responses to these difficulties vary, so binding them together in a single definition that delineates them within religious/liberal, progressive/radical, fundamentalism/ feminism, or victim/abuser binary is a partial and fragmentary strategy. Yousafzai and Chinoy have endeavored to reoccupy the hegemonic discourse, utilizing the liminal spaces and interstices open to them by virtue of existing in unique milieus in which to construct their identity. However, they are constantly challenged by the double bind that imprisons them simultaneously in the Eurocentric discourse for being 'oppressed Muslim women', and in pa-

triarchal and religious discourses at ‘home,’ mostly for being brash and unashamed libertines and not being Muslim ‘enough.’ In “The Double Bind Starts to Kick In” (2012), Spivak talks of the ‘double bind’ as a productive space only when people are willing to remain awkwardly within it as opposed to exiting quickly. Seen through this framework, the experience of double bind for Yousafzai and Chinoy contains the possibility of taking agency and assuming the burden of responsibility by creating a space where they can dare to defy the pressures to confirm to the stereotypes and venture to challenge the double binds. Both these women reject the discourses of Islamic exceptionalism and are not only drawing upon but also reshaping women’s rights discourses in accordance with their lived experiences and distinct visions for the future.

The debate around religion and feminism is usually framed in terms of women’s agency, autonomy, and power to make choices, which become a signifier of women emancipation. In her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Lila Abu-Lughod asks readers to take time to listen to Muslim women instead of assuming through the noise of familiar stories. According to her, the familiar stories of Muslim women’s oppression have been made convincing through their association with the ‘purity’ of the language of universal rights. Malala and Sharmeen’s redemption out of the double bind of identity, in which they are caught as a result of being positioned in dualistic ideologies of Islam and secular politics, is possible only if their critique comes from well-informed sources that are contextualized within broader and more complex frameworks that address a constant increasing pressure on women regarding safeguarding their nation’s honor due to social, cultural, and political anxieties (Toor 2014, 140). Also, such a critique needs to consider the diverse nature of the challenges that are fueled by economic and cultural globalization and require women activists to adapt varying strategies of resistance from different histories and cultures, ideas and philosophies surrounding the concepts of emancipation, freedom, and liberation.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Naila Sahar is AAUW International Postdoctoral Fellow at Department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies, University at Buffalo where she is researching the social and religious activism of Muslim women migrants and refugees in the Middle East and South Asia. She did her PhD as a Fulbright scholar in the department of English, University at Buffalo. The topic of her PhD dissertation is *Reimagining Muslim women: Gendered Religious Life and Resistance in the age of Islamophobia*. Her research interests include feminist studies, gender studies, gendered religious nationalism, South Asian studies and postcolonial studies. Her work has appeared in edited volumes with Routledge, South Asian Review, Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies and South Asian Voices.
- 2 Acknowledging the diversity of feminist theoretical and geographical backgrounds in the West, this paper uses the term 'western' as a shorthand for the unabashedly exclusionary "white, middle class, liberal/neo-liberal feminism" that reinforces existing structures of power by only seeking to "add women and stir" into those structures thus rendering them as absent or missing in action as agents in the history of feminist struggle.

- 3 Read: Shaheed, Farida. "Contested identities: Gendered politics, gendered religion in Pakistan." *Third World Quarterly* 31.6 (2010): 851-867. According to Shaheed, in Pakistani context, a vigorous cultural agenda prescribing everyday norms is a hallmark of all politico-religious projects, in which gender-normative regulations are most visible as dress codes, women's seclusion and restricted activities (851).
- 4 Spivak 2012, p104-05.
- 5 Read: Kumar, Deepa. *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire: Twenty years after 9/11*. Verso Books, 2021, and Zine, Jasmin. *Under Siege: Islamophobia and the 9/11 generation*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2022.
- 6 <https://www.vuelio.com/uk/blog/brand-malala/>
- 7 According to Robert Young, this was spectacularly dramatized in India and Africa on the occasions when the colonial government attempted to outlaw practices such as child marriage, widow-burning, and female genital mutilation. The preservation of these practices became celebrated causes for nationalist resistance (2003, p. 97).
- 8 In February 1899, British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled "The White Man's Burden: The United States and The Philippine Islands." In this poem, Kipling urged the U.S. to take up the "burden" of empire, as had Britain and other European nations.
- 9 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/13/opinion/heng-cartoon-malala-yousafzai-shot-by-taliban.html>
- 10 The Islamic laws of Zia also included laws for women. Zia put forward the theory of "Chadfear Aur Chaar Devari" and this was to be applied to women. Thus, for the first time, a woman could be flogged for adultery. If a rape was reported, four witnesses were to be provided otherwise, legally, the rape could be termed adultery. Another law, The Law of Evidence, under the Shariah laws proposed that the testimony of a woman was not equal to that of a man. In legal matters, two women would have to stand witness against the testimony of one man. The status of women was thus arbitrarily cut in half by Zia. <http://storyofpakistan.com/islamization-under-general-zia-ul-haq>
- 11 <https://pakistanblogzine.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/sharmeen-obaid-chinoy-and-her-oscar-do-not-mean-much-for-pakistan/>
- 12 <https://pakistanblogzine.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/sharmeen-obaid-chinoy-and-her-oscar-do-not-mean-much-for-pakistan/>