

SHOWING WITHOUT REVEALING: DIGITAL RESISTANCE AND PASHTUN WOMEN'S SELF-REPRESENTATION ON X (FORMERLY TWITTER)

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ABSTRACT

A significant number of Pashtun women on X (formerly Twitter)— the ‘modest’ and ‘pardah-daar’ (veiled) members of a conservative patriarchal society —have found a way to exist on the digital platform by managing to camouflage their real selves. Living under watchful familial surveillance, these women are often regarded as “nang” (honor) of their family, clan, and tribe. Often confined to their homes in remote rural regions or made to shroud themselves in veils of chastity (Pardah) when out and about, these women, take advantage of the anonymity of social media forums to channelize their expression. Despite these limitations, there has emerged a Pashtun digital subculture where the Pashtun women have found their existence in anonymity. They record their digital presence by posting photos of their manicured nail polished hands, aesthetic half faced images, slow-paced feet videos wearing attractive jewelry or mere silhouettes which showcase their created existence. In effect, these Pashtun women have found a robust digital existence and negotiated visibility through such micro-visual practices, negating to submit fully to their patriarchal erasure. To borrow Foucault’s concept of Panopticon, Pashtun women often surreptitiously form anonymous aesthetic public spaces where they create elaborate digital identities. They choose anonymity as they are under the panopticon of gender-segregated tribal codes. By using pseudonyms, fake and imaginary location, images that do not display their full faces, and innovative identities instead of their original names, they erase their traceable real identities. This is how they successfully circumnavigate their real-world familial surveillance as well as the risk of being identified by any acquaintance.

Keywords: X, Pashtun women, Nang i.e., honour, burqa, Foucault’s Panopticon, Digital Ethnography, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Visual Discourse Analysis, Digital Identities.

1. Introduction and Background

Access to internet and the proliferation of smartphones have made social media applications quite popular and accessible around the globe. Social media platforms have, in recent times, managed to reach marginalized communities and have become a medium to convey voices that were never heard before. Pashtun young girls and women are also marking their existence through social media platform like X. Characterized by its tribal ethos, Pashtun culture goes by the tribal code of Pashtunwali where women are often associated with the

family, clan, or tribal Nang or Gherat (honour). Women are expected to observe, in most cases, a strict code of *Satr* or *Pardah* covering the body and face. A Pashun woman is considered good, chaste and modest if she abides by the rules of *Pardah* and confines herself to the boundaries of the familial home. Moreover, women are expected to be render themselves unrecognizable (by covering their face and body) when they travel outside of the home. Often their names are exempted from family land partition proceedings, their own wedding cards and even their tombstones and instead names of their

husbands and fathers are used. This ‘Onymic Erasure’ is, in effect, a way to omit the legal existence of women (Orfan & Rahimi, 2022).

A vital part of the Pashtun culture is the *Hujra*. It is the social and political heart of a Pashtun village. A centuries-old institution, the *Hujra* is a gathering place for the men which serves a guesthouse, townhall, parliament all rolled in to one. The *hujra* is the engine behind *Pashtunwali* (the ethical and cultural code of the Pashtun culture). Women have been kept out of *Hujra* for centuries. This silent erasure of physical self and identity in real life has forced many Pashtun women to find their digital existence on X and form their own *Hujras*. It helps these Pashtun women to indulge in sociopolitical and feminist discourse, which otherwise would lead to their cultural alienation and might result in honour-based violence against them (Najeeb, 2024)

Revealing their names or face would be tantamount to negation of the tribal or familial *nang or ghairat* (honour) (Sorush, 2019). Women, therefore, post their fractional glimpses and unidentifiable hand or feet images to record their existence in the digital world. However, anonymously resisting the problematic patriarchal norms of Pashtun culture is not a nascent strategy. Pashtun women have for centuries resisted in the form of local folklore and *tappay* (Pashto folk couplet) songs (Khan, 2020).

This study investigates such particular visual representation of Pashtun women on X. While the Western-centric feminist frameworks concern themselves with the liberation of female body and their goal is to “unshackle women”; this study presents a different framework. It focuses on how Pashtun women find their digital expression while staying within the bounds of gender-segregated patriarchal order and attempt to challenge the order slowly from within.

2. Research Objectives

- i. To identify and classify the visual motifs and aesthetic tropes deployed by the Pashtun women on X.
- ii. To investigate how anonymity on X is protecting Pashtun women from gender-based violence.

- iii. To find out how these visual practices by Pashtun women on X are a form of protest against patriarchy and a way to find a voice.

- iv. To investigate the digital solidarity and community formed by the Pashtun women on X.

3. Research Questions

- i. What specific visual vocabularies and material tropes do Pashtun women utilize on X to construct a digital presence while maintaining facial and nominal anonymity?
- ii. How do these visual practices subvert the traditional concepts of patriarchy and give an agentic authorial voice to the otherwise voiceless Pashtun women?
- iii. What kind of Pashtun women digital community and solidarity is built through their such shared and collective anonymous visual representation on X?
- iv. How does anonymity act as a shield to protect the Pashtun women from gender-based violence as anonymity is considered a threat in some parts of the world?

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

This study has employed the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FDCA) to explore the visual and textual representation of Pashtun women on the social media platform X. Drawing from the traditions of Michelle Lazer and Norman Fairclough, FCDA tends to examine how power relations, ideological pulls and gendered power struggles are manifested through language and imagery. In the context of the present study, the tweets as well as the images uploaded by the X users, which are called tweeks, are inherently a multimodal. FCDA is helpful in deconstructing how the Pashtun women challenge the prevalent patriarchal discourse. The total female invisibility is one important aspect of such patriarchal course. Through FCDA, this study examined how such invisibility is challenged by the Pashtun women by coming out in silhouettes and partial images to record their visibility into the public discourse in anonymity.

4.2 Authorial Voice and Agency Within Conservative Structures

Saba Mahmood’s (2005) critique of liberal secular feminism is crucial to this study. Mahmood argues that agency should not just be

understood as a progressive subversion of norms or a desire for radical liberation from tradition. Instead, agency can manifest as the capacity to endure, navigate, and creatively work within the matrix of conservative, religious, or traditional structures. The partial self-representation of Pashtun women on X exemplifies this; it is an act of agency that respects the boundaries of *Purdah* and *Pashtunwali* while refusing the complete silencing that absolute patriarchy demands. It is an agentic inhabitation of tradition rather than a secular rejection of it.

4.3 The Digital Panopticon and Strategic Anonymity

The concept of *Panopticon* by Michel Foucault applies to the digital lives of the Pashtun women on X. According to panopticon, the individuals apply self-censorship on their selves because of their assumed notion of being under a constant watch. The concept of panopticon applies directly to the digital lives of the Pashtun women as they feel constant surveillance (Radhakrishnan, 2022). Social media platforms are densely populated by men of their culture, families as well as random trolls and social media moral policing. This creates a digital panopticon for the Pashtun women and to survive such panopticon of constant digital surveillance, women come up with the strategy of anonymity and unrecognizable and untraceable aesthetic images of themselves. This way the women survive the threat of recognition and familial identification by creating a safer digital space with negotiated visibility.

5. Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature to investigate the visual subcultures on the X while maintaining a strict security protocol for the vulnerable participants. The method of passive digital ethnography along with visual discourse analysis was adopted to draw conclusions. This was conducted by observing a purposive sample of self-identifying X accounts of the Pashtun women for over a period of six months. The data collected included the social interactions through public comments section, visuals shared with and without texts, hashtags, movements and celebrations of special events on X. A sum of 150 image centric posts shared on X by these selected accounts were selected for visual

discourse analysis. A three-tier approach was utilized to draw conclusions and meanings from such selected set of images.

- i. **Representational Meaning:** This includes what is being shown in literal sense in a certain uploaded image by a certain X user. For instance, a user could have uploaded an image of their eyes only or their hand holding a cup of tea.
- ii. **Interactive Meaning:** This deals with how a certain image are being portrayed and framed. For instance, the filters employed in the image of their eyes shared or the background shown. It also implies the natural settings, indoor or outdoor or any kind of focusing employed in the selected uploaded image.
- iii. **Compositional meaning:** This implies the connection between the image shared and the text or hashtag or any commentary uploaded with it. This could include a piercing critique of the patriarchy, Pashtun culture or violence committed against women with the eyes image is uploaded or a hand holding a cup of tea.

5.2. Research Design Steps

The Research was executed in the following three stages:

- i. **Digital Ethnography, Phase One:** For over a six-month duration, enough time was spent on the X, observing how the selected 150 Pashtun women accounts on X interacted, dealt the hashtags, and uploaded images.
- ii. **Visual Discourse Analysis as Stage Two:** A sample of 200-300 posts on X was collected and the visual markers were categorized. Data was extracted according to the three types of meanings discussed above.
- iii. **Digital Interviews, Stage Three:** Semi structured interviews were conducted with 10-12 Pashtun women X users. The interviews were totally designed and conducted as per such users' choices to avoid offline threats to such users. The questions mainly included what are the real-life safety risks that they face if they come out with their own real names on X and how it feels to be anonymous and expressive.

5.3. Ethical Considerations

In order to avoid offline threats to the selected accounts on X, protective measures were strictly

observed to maintain their safety in anonymity. No screenshots were saved or included in the analysis of this study to avoid the digital tracking and image-searching of such vulnerable X accounts. All visual data was translated into descriptive texts to avoid offline tracking of X accounts. The over 150 accounts visited, the interviewed accounts as well as the over 200 posts analyzed were further assigned pseudonyms and generic signifiers to protect their anonymization.

6. Analysis and Discussion: The Themes of Partial Visibility

The empirical data revealed the following three distinct visual strategies used by Pashtun women to mark their existence on X.

6.1. The Juxtaposition of Delicate and Fierce

The common pattern observed in the selected X posts, included a combination of a highly aesthetic and delicate image followed by a bold social commentary. The X user Gulmakai posted an image of her nail painted hand wearing aesthetic jewelry, an emerald ring with a fragile bracelet. This aesthetically pleasing image was followed by a bold take translated as, *"...all I worry about is my wet nail paint, while the men think I fear holding a gun like them"*.

Condemning the murder of Sana Yousaf, a 17-year-old social media influencer, the X user Samina wrote along her half-face image,

"...we are forced to hide behind anonymous accounts because we fear to become the next Sana at the hands of men around us #JusticeforSanaYousaf".

Thus, such a combination of an image followed by a bold take depicts the authenticity of the existence of a real Pashtun woman shielding behind the X account. The text added is the testimony of a political critique put forward by a real Pashtun woman as her share of the digital resistance and existence.

6.2. Cultural Materialism and Owing the Pashtun Culture

Most of the images contain cultural artifacts, the local traditional jewelry associated with the Pashtun culture. Some images shared included hands and foreheads decorated with *khaloona*,

the traditional dot tattoos that the indigenous Pashtun women used to carve on their faces, hands and feet. Though these are fake tattoos but are shared by the Pashtun women to display their love and affiliation with their culture, shunning the idea that their protest against the anti-women norms of their culture is a westernized propaganda. An X user Pashmina uploaded a photo of her chin decorated with three traditional dots on it, the text with it read as,

"I am more Pashtun than any Pashtun man around; I carry the khaloona as a sign while you carry the horrible gun as a sign of your culture."

The cultural display of such images thus further add life to an authentic Pashtun voice existing behind such anonymous accounts, clarifying that they aren't de-cultured but connected with their Pashtun identity and roots.

6.3. The Aestheticization of Space and Solitude

Another category of the uploaded media included the beacon on feet, bare or wearing shoes, a stroll on the grass, feet placed on the traditional Afghan carpets or a short video clip or photo taken while strolling in the fields of a certain local village. Such images included aesthetic filters with sepia tones or fairy lights appealing to the aesthetic senses. A thorough visual analysis of such uploaded media conveyed the yearning of such users for spatial mobility which is missing from their lives. In a patriarchal culture where a woman is believed to be made either for home or grave, and whose movement outside as well as inside the home is heavily monitored by the men of her family and tribe, such images reek of protest for freedom to move. During the interview, six users shared that they cannot even move out independently for something as basic as grocery while three users said that going out to grocery along with her brother and mother is a luxury trip for them. An X user Gulaan uploaded her own photo clad in a white chaddar while walking in a village field, the text she posted with it read as,

"It is my forefather's land but because I am not the son, I have to sneak out to get a photo here and probably would get killed if I claim my share in it tomorrow".

This conveys the protest against the culture and the explanation of the plight of the Pashtun women who do not have the right to freedom of movement.

6.4 The *Pashtunwali* and *Rorwali* (Brotherhood) Vs the *Khorwali* (Sisterhood)

While *Pashtunwali* in Pashtun culture is the code of living for the Pashtun men. This further gives birth to *Rorwali* or brotherhood among the Pashtun men. Interestingly X transforms into a digital *Hujra* for the Pashtun women where they could not only freely walk and talk around and be the boss of themselves but also form the bond of *Khorwali* or sisterhood by connecting with same minded fellow Pashtun women. This unique form of solidarity that originates from their mutual protest against their shared culture is another analysis drawn from the analysis of such posts on X. A tweep Salma shared in her interview with the researcher that she has found the best people on X and they do physically meet in real life after anonymous encounters on X. Another X user said,

"I live in Chicago, roam without a veil but I still cannot upload my photo to my X account. However, when I came to Pakistan last year, I met at least 7 anonymous female users from X, we took selfies together, and we know we all are safe in each other's phones because we bond through *khawwali*".

7. Conclusion

The visual subculture of Pashtun women on X offers a powerful counter-narrative to mainstream digital media studies. Rather than viewing the absence of a full facial portrait as a sign of oppression, erasure, or submission, this study demonstrates that partial visibility is a highly sophisticated, tactical negotiation. By "showing without revealing," Pashtun women creatively exploit the visual and textual affordances of X to build a digital counter-rhetoric.

They manifest their right to exist, speak, and be visible in the public sphere, safeguarding their real life physical bodies from the offline gender-violence while marking their existence in the digital world. This localized form of digital agency challenges binary notions of liberation, illustrating that resistance within deeply patriarchal societies is often a quiet, fragmented, yet profoundly resilient act. Ultimately, these

curated fragments of the self prove that an identity does not need to be fully uncovered to be intensely powerful, politically transgressive, and unapologetically present. Nominal and facial identity can remain anonymous yet speak volumes about itself as safety comes first. This form of digital existence is a unique way of self-expression.

This study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of women's visibility, agency, and representation in digital environments by offering practical insights that support the development of ethical, equitable, and gender-inclusive online spaces across diverse social and cultural contexts.

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