



**WOMANSPLAINING: NAVIGATING ACTIVISM,  
POLITICS AND MODERNITY IN PAKISTAN**

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*Womansplaining*, by Sherry Rahman, is an anthology of essays that unfolds the labyrinth of complexities women encounter in patriarchal societies. A collation of 22 leading voices of feminists belonging to different eras and diverse professions, this book delves into the profound impact patriarchy is having on the everyday life experiences of women. A multitude of themes are scrutinized through the lens of feminism and activism. In this context, feminism is classified as a synergized set of ideologies and dogmas focusing on the patriarchal system, which is intertwined with myriad of societal dimensions pertaining to social, cultural, economic and political spheres that structure gender inequality between men and women. Feminist or women's activism, refers to the movements which aim to define, establish and defend the rights of women.

It is argued that the patriarchal system in Pakistan is underpinned by institutions governed by social pressures, reflecting social biases and prejudices against women. This became the fundamental catalyst for women activism that originally initiated in the 1950s but predominantly gained momentum in the 1980s and has continued to date. In this context, the book establishes linkages among several generations of feminists and the intergenerational challenges they face. Pioneers like Hina Jilani, Fareeda Shaheed, Zohra Yusuf, and Khawar Mumtaz have shared their own stories in the book highlighting their life trajectories in the era of the eighties when women's rights were not really at the center of public discourse and gender-discriminatory practices were rampant. This triggered reactive activism which continued to pave its way into the nineties amid political carousel of dictatorship and democracy. In the political arena, women empowerment at every institutional level is vital in order to make representative and legitimate decisions. In order to challenge the deep rooted patriarchal and feudalistic values, women parliamentarians and activists have worked together to change formal laws, freeing vulnerable women from distress that they encounter at the hands

of the legal system. For instance, Maliha Zia delves into positive changes wrought on the Zina Ordinance 2006, which had an instant impact on women, thereby, paving way for the new wave of feminism.

The conventional version of women activism differs from this new, contemporary iteration of feminism in several ways. The former was more focused on challenging the State and hence comprised welfare projects focused on developmental issues associated with education, health and income of poor women. These projects were acceptable by the conservative patriarchies of that time. On the contrary, this new wave of feminism is making a tectonic shift in the feminist landscape in Pakistan. It is depicting an entirely new phase in feminist struggles by challenging and deconstructing the hallowed private sphere of the family, community, and society. In the light of this, *Aurat March* became a catalyst to breach cultural norms and parochial mindset paving way for hope, solidarity, self-assuredness and women empowerment. However, millennial feminists faced immense backlash in the form of resistance by misogynists unleashing public anger and vilification against the emerging diversity and inclusiveness in feminism. But despite all these adversities, contemporary activism has a broader spectrum, specifically via extensive use of social media, which is used for greater mobilization and outreach. It deals aggressively with body politics and other things that were not dealt with earlier. It also deals with the kind of encroachments on women's rights and space that they, at that time, could not put to a challenge.

Although contradictions, ambiguities and submerged conflicts exist between and among various feminists groups and schools of thought, yet, the main objective remains the same – addressing the issues associated with intersectionality and multiple identities. The essays talk about countless bottlenecks and setbacks women encounter in a patriarchal system just because they occupy a relatively less powerful position compared to men. For instance, Ayesha Razzaque, discusses the culture of keeping girls ignorant, uneducated and out of school; Rafia Zakariya sheds light on the severity of health issues women face predominantly because of domestic violence, particularly during lockdowns in Covid-19; Afia Sherbano talks about the undocumented and informal role of women in the labor economy; Nighat Dad and Shomaila shed very compelling light on the activism in the digital world and on the contradictions and challenges faced by #metoo movement; Sharmeen Obaid talks about women rights and tells stories from the edge of pain that how women are suffering at the frontlines of resistance by bringing their voices to television screens around the world. Sara Malkani provides a remarkable discourse on the legal framework; Sofi Ibrahim bring her experience about climate change to the forefront in terms of how climate disasters specifically affect poor rural women

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who are more vulnerable to environmental stress compared to their male counterparts; Rubina Shah and Fifi Haroon have addressed different aspects of literature and writing on resistance. Fifi has looked at Pakistani soaps and how they stereotype women and show the glorification of their miseries.

Against this backdrop, these essays clearly emphasize the severity of issues related to the overall well-being of women and hence strive to provide a panacea for the aforementioned discourse. It is now widely understood that women do not comprise an abstract category that exists outside of social, economic and political differences and inequalities. Beyond being women, they belong to a class, race, religion, sect, ethnicity, nation and country. In this context, the book talks about countless policies and coping mechanisms pertinent to addressing the issues of intersectionality. However, despite all this, the ideology driven policies per se are questionable, particularly, in terms of sustainability. Informal institutions or constraints comprising cultural norms associated with women in patriarchal structures are mainly path dependent. These are customs and traditions originally devised to create “order” in society but at the cost of violating women’s rights. The society we live in is much more complex. Deconstructing the abysmal situation pertinent to the rights of women speak volumes about their vulnerability. Therefore, *Womansplaining* aims to present a synergism that talks about “finding a voice, amplifying it and using it to level up priorities, tell stories, build bridges, fight misogyny, take down patriarchy, take flight and celebrate courage.”