Digital Vilification and Intersectional Hate: Gendered and Sexualized Attacks on Shaheen Bagh Women Protesters

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21412896

Abstract

This study examines how Muslim women protesting at Shaheen Bagh during the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) were targeted through gendered and sexualized hate on social media. It focuses on how pro-CAA online narratives used abuse, moral language, and religious framing to question women's legitimacy as political actors as anti-CAA protesters. This study defines this phenomenon as a form of digital vilification where gender and religion intersect to delegitimize dissent. Focusing on the period between December 2019 and March 2020, this study analyzes a curated data set of 200 posts from platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Using qualitative discourse analysis, this study identifies recurring patterns in how female protesters were portrayed as immoral, "paid participants," or manipulated subjects, rather than as autonomous political actors. Particular attention is given to the use of sexualized language, character attacks, and narratives of honor and shame that sought to control women's public presence. The findings suggest that such rhetoric functions as a form of symbolic violence, reinforcing both patriarchal norms and communal boundaries. By framing Muslim women's political participation as deviant or illegitimate, these narratives silenced dissent and reshaped public perception of the protests. This study contributes to debates on digital politics, gender, and religious polarization by showing how online hate can operate as a tool of political control. Methodologically, this study combines purposive sampling, thematic analysis, and critical discourse analysis.

Keywords: Trolling politics; digital misogyny; online abuse; communal rhetoric; symbolic violence.

1. Introduction

The expansion of digital media has transformed how political movements are organized and perceived, allowing protests to reach audiences at various scales. However, this same expansion has given rise to increased identity-driven hostility online, with women often being the primary targets (Jane, 2017). Social media has become a prominent arena for trolling, sexualized abuse, and digital vilification, where women are subjected to organized online hostility because of their gender (Sobieraj, 2020). Within this context, the Shaheen Bagh protest in New Delhi, led by women beginning in 2019, marked an important development in women's public participation in India's political activism. This protest was catalyzed by the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019, which aimed to grant citizenship to certain groups of migrants while excluding Muslims from the list. Combined with the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR), these measures have generated concerns among Muslim communities about religious discrimination and the undermining of constitutional equality. In response to these developments and earlier student-led protests, residents of Shaheen Bagh, a predominantly Muslim area, initiated a continuous sit-in from December 15, 2019 (Salam, 2020; Farooq, 2020).

Shaheen Bagh stood out due to the active involvement of Muslim women, many of whom had never participated in protests before. Women spanning various age groups, from young mothers to the elderly, maintained a continuous and peaceful sit-in in public spaces. This directly confronted long-standing norms that often keep women, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, restricted to the private realm (Bhatia & Gajjala, 2020). Their protests were motivated not only by fears of exclusion from citizenship but also by a collective sense of duty to safeguard their families and future generations. This act transformed the traditional boundaries between home (ghar) and public life (bahir), as women extended their caregiving roles to political activism (Chopra & Saniyal, 2022). As momentum grew, Shaheen Bagh became a symbol of democratic protest, sparking similar movements in other cities across India. Social media played a significant role in amplifying the protest's message and visuals, helping to build solidarity and sparking wide-ranging discussions.

However, this increased visibility was accompanied by a surge in online vilification. Social media platforms witnessed a proliferation of posts characterized by trolling, explicit sexualized abuse, and derogatory representation of women protesters (Sen & Jha, 2025). Much of this content

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
ISSN (O): 3105-3769

appeared to undermine the legitimacy of the movement by targeting the gender and religious identity of its participants. The intensity and nature of such discourse suggest that digital spaces functioned not only as platforms for mobilization but also as arenas for gendered attack. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of digital vilification, wherein women's public and political visibility triggers targeted online abuse (Krook, 2020).

This study examines the intersection of protest, gender, and digital vilification in the context of the Shaheen Bagh movement, focusing on how Muslim women's visibility in political resistance was contested and delegitimized within digital spaces. It explores how pro-CAA online narratives deployed gendered and sexualized abuse, moral policing, and religious framing to question women's agency and portray them as immoral, manipulated, or inauthentic political actors (Mustafa, 2022). Conceptualizing this pattern as a form of digital vilification, this study highlights how gender and religion intersect in online discourse to produce symbolic violence aimed at silencing dissent. It argues that such representations not only undermine the legitimacy of women's political participation but also reinforce broader patriarchal norms and communal boundaries (Zia, 2020).

The Shaheen Bagh protests appear to be largely organized, led, and sustained by Muslim women who have not had a significant presence in public protests across India for a long time. This is also what we see in social media representation. Therefore, a key question framing this paper concerns the visual and discursive impact of the presence of (Muslim) women's bodies in protest spaces. This study addresses three critical research questions.

1. How did digital platforms weaponize gendered and communal narratives to delegitimize Muslim women protesters at Shaheen Bagh?
2. In what ways did sexualize trolling, moral policing, and paid protest narratives function as tool of political control against women-led dissent?
3. How does digital vilification reshape public perception of protest movements and discourage women's political participation in democratic spaces?

This paper argues that digital vilification of Shaheen Bagh women operated as a form of symbolic violence that weaponized gender and religion to delegitimize dissent and reinforce patriarchal and communal boundaries.

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ISSN (O): 3105-3769

2. Literature Review

To address these questions, this study reviews the existing literature on online hate speech against women and places it within the context of contemporary protest movements, particularly the Shaheen Bagh mobilization. A growing body of research shows that digital platforms are no longer neutral spaces of communication; rather, they have become active sites where gender-based hostility is produced, circulated, and normalized. Frenda et al. (2019) argue that misogyny and sexism are deeply rooted in patriarchal social structures and often overlap in both language and intent. Their study highlighted that online hate is not always direct or explicit; it frequently appears in subtle forms such as humor, sarcasm, or everyday language, making it difficult to detect and regulate. This suggests that engendered hate operates not only through overt abuse but also through normalized discourse that reinforces gender inequality. Similarly, Saha et al. (2018) examined Instagram and showed that misogynistic hate speech is expressed through multiple forms, including images, memes, captions, and user comments. They argue that such content often presents women as inferior, weak, or objectified and is closely linked to broader ideological structures that support patriarchy. Their study also points out that online hate has real-world consequences as it creates fear, anxiety, and self-censorship among women, limiting their participation in digital spaces.

In a related vein, Frenda et al. (2019) focused on the use of machine learning techniques to detect hate speech against women on Twitter. They demonstrated that computational tools can effectively identify patterns of abusive language, especially when supported by linguistic and contextual features. However, they also acknowledge the limitations of these methods, particularly in understanding the nuanced expressions of hate and differentiating between types of misogyny. This indicates that technological solutions alone are insufficient to address the complexity of online gendered abuse. Expanding the conceptual understanding of hate speech, Richardson-Self (2018) argues that misogynistic speech should be recognized as a form of hate speech because it functions to control, harm, punish, and silence women, even when it targets individuals rather than the group as a whole.

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
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Building on this, Roy (2019) introduced the concept of digital vilification to explain how online platforms enable the widespread circulation of contemptuous, sexualized, and identity-based attacks against women, particularly those who are visible in public, professional, or political spaces.

Sobieraj (2020) expanded this discourse by identifying these digital attacks as a "credible threat" to democratic participation. She argues that identity-based digital abuse functions as a tax on women's speech, where the psychological and social costs of participation are intentionally raised to force women into "digital retreat." Similarly, Krook (2020) conceptualizes this as the "violence against women in politics" (VAWIP), suggesting that such abuse is a strategic tool used to preserve traditional power hierarchies by attacking the moral and sexual reputation of women who occupy public roles. In the South Asian context, Sen & Jha (2025) observe that digital vilification is often wrapped in "nationalist scripts," where women protesters are not just attacked for their gender but are framed as "anti-national" or "transactional actors" to alienate them from broader public empathy.

Together, these studies show that online hate against women is not only a technological issue but also a social and political problem rooted in power relations and gender hierarchies. Bhatia (2020) highlights how online political discourse often becomes polarized and hostile, while dissenting voices, particularly women, are targeted through abuse and delegitimization. Similarly, Gajjala (2021) points out that digital platforms intensify gendered Islamophobia, where a Muslim woman faces both religious and gender-based attacks, especially when they are visibly engaged in political debate.

Within the Indian context, scholarship on the Shaheen Bagh protest provides important insights into women's political participation and the transformation of public spaces. Biswas (2023) conceptualizes the protest as a feminist political movement in which Muslim women redefined the nature of activism by bringing their everyday caregiving roles into the public sphere. By doing so, they challenge the traditional divide between the private (ghar) and public (Bahir) spheres, showing that political engagement can emerge from everyday experience and responsibilities. Hashmi (2022) further interprets the movement as a shift from "silent citizenship" to "insurgent citizenship,"

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where Muslim women moved from a position of passive belonging to active political assertion. His analysis highlights how women challenged dominant stereotypes and used the language of the constitution and democracy to claim their rights. Mehrotra (2021) adds another dimension by focusing on affective visual culture and representation, showing how emotions, symbols, and artistic expressions have transformed Shaheen Bagh into a powerful sight of resistance. Mirza (2020), through an ethnographic approach, highlights that many participants were first-time protesters who developed political awareness and subjectivity through their involvement in the movement.

While existing scholarship has documented the Shaheen Bagh movement as a landmark of grassroots political assertion, a critical scholarly void remains regarding the systematic digital vilification of Muslim women protesters. Current literature focuses largely on the physical dynamics and symbolic nature of the sit-in protests. However, there is limited research on how digital platforms were systematically weaponized to delegitimize Muslim women's political agency. This research addresses this identified gap by offering a granular examination of intersectional digital vilification. It moves beyond general online harassment to analyze how specific 'paid protest' narratives and sexualized tropes were utilized as tools of political control. By investigating these digital artifacts, the study elucidates how symbolic violence is used to discipline female dissent and reinforce communal boundaries in India.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the intricate intersections between women's political agency, digital environments, and gendered hostility during the Anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests at Shaheen Bagh. By utilizing a qualitative framework, this research seeks to uncover the underlying meanings, ideological constructs, and power dynamics embedded within digital discourse.

3.1. Data Sources and Sampling Strategy

The primary data for this research were derived from a systematic content analysis of social media platforms, specifically X (formerly Twitter) and

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
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Facebook. These platforms were selected because of their role as primary arenas for political communication and the high volume of discourse generated during the movement. This study employed purposive sampling to curate a specialized data set aligned with the research objectives. The corpus consisted of 200 primary digital units, comprising 25 selected posts from X and 25 from Facebook for each of the four identified themes. The sampling criteria prioritized content that exhibited clear markers of digital vilification, including but not limited to sexualized abuse and vulgar insinuations, character assassination and moral policing, communal targeting and identity based tropes, and dissemination of the "paid protest" narrative. The unit of analysis extends beyond primary posters to include associated metadata, such as comments, replies, hashtags, memes, and visual artifacts, providing a holistic view of the digital environment.

3.2. Data Analysis: Thematic Approach

The collected data were processed using thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns (themes) within the digital narratives. This process involved a multi-stage coding approach: initially identifying raw tropes (e.g, "₹500 narratives") and subsequently categorizing them into broader analytical themes such as "economic humiliation" and "symbolic annihilation." To complement the primary digital data, this study incorporates secondary sources, including peer -reviewed academic articles, investigative media reports, and existing scholarship on digital misogyny and socio-legal dimensions of the Shaheen Bagh movement. This triangulation of data ensured a robust and contextualized analysis.

3.3. Methodological framework: Feminist Epistemology

This research is deeply informed by a feminist methodological perspective, which situates gender power relations at the core of the inquiry. Rather than treating online abuse as an isolated incident of trolling, this framework interprets this digital vilification as a structural mechanism used to discipline and marginalize women in the public sphere. By centering the lived experience of Muslim women and the symbolic violence directed at their "political bodies," this study examines how digital spaces function to reinforce patriarchal and majoritarian boundaries.

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3.4. Ethical Considerations

As this study analyzes publicly available social media data, formal ethics approval was not required. However, the researchers have taken steps to protect privacy by anonymizing all user identities, usernames, and identifying information. Only posts that were publicly accessible without login or private account access were included in the analysis. The researchers acknowledge that even public data can have privacy implications and have therefore avoided reproducing content that could directly identify individuals.

3.5. Researcher Positionality

The authors acknowledge their positionality as researchers based in India with an interest in gender, religion, and digital politics. While every effort has been made to maintain analytical objectivity, the authors recognize that their social locations and political commitments may shape their interpretation of the data. This positionality informs but does not determine the analysis.

3.6. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis is limited to two platforms (Twitter and Facebook) and may not capture the full range of digital discourse on other platforms (Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Telegram). Second, the sample size of 200 posts, while purposively selected, may not be representative of all digital vilification. Third, the study relies on publicly available data and does not include interviews with targeted women. Fourth, the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms means that the data reflects a specific historical moment (December 2019-March 2020).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Forms of Digital Vilification: Constructing the "Paid Protest" Narrative

A significant pattern that emerged in social media discussions surrounding the Shaheen Bagh movement was the repeated construction of the "paid protest" narrative. Twitter posts, Facebook comments, memes, and edited visual content frequently portrayed female protesters as individuals participating in the movement for monetary benefits rather than political

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conviction. This framing was not merely a critique of the protests; rather, it represented a deliberate attempt to delegitimize women's political participation by questioning their morality, agency, and credibility (Saha, 2021)

The language employed in several online posts reveals the gender nature of this hostility. Women protesters were described through terms such as "bikau auratein Shaheen Bagh ki" (sell-out women of Shaheen Bagh), and many others similar, while hashtags and comments repeatedly suggested that women were being "paid ₹500" to sit at the protest site. Such claims reduced the political concerns of the protesters into a transactional act and dismissed their constitutional anxieties regarding the CAA, NRC, and NPR (Farooq, 2020). Instead of engaging with the substance of the movement, online discourse shifted towards humiliating and trivializing women who occupied public space in protest.

The digital content collected for this study also demonstrates how misogyny and communal prejudice operate simultaneously within online space. Several posters used sexualized jokes, vulgar insinuation, and suggestive language to attack Muslim women's protests. This intersection of gender and religion in digital hate speech reflects what scholars' term "intersectional vilification," via identity makers are weaponized to amplify exclusion (Gajjala, 2020; Terman, 2017). In one instance, a post implied that women attending the protest were involved in immoral activities for money, while another meme visually depicted Muslim women receiving cash rewards for participating in the demonstrations. These representations transformed women's political visibility into an object of ridicule and of moral suspension. The attack, therefore, was not directed only at the protest itself but at the idea of Muslim women exercising political agency in public (Mustafa, 2022).

A close reading of these posts suggests that digital vilification functions through two interconnected strategies. First, it framed the protest as inauthentic by presenting it as financially motivated and manipulated externally. Second, it targeted the gendered identity of female protesters through humiliation, sexualization, and character assassination. In this process, women were denied the status of rational political actors, capable of

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independent dissent. Their participation was instead interpreted through a patriarchal exception that women entering public political spaces must be either manipulated, immoral, or politically ignorant (Krook & Sanin, 2020).

The circulation of memes and visual satire further intensified this vilification. Humor was frequently used as a mechanism to normalize abusive speech and make misogynistic attacks appear socially acceptable. By packaging hostility in the form of jokes, cartoons, or sarcastic comments, online users reproduced gendered abuse while simultaneously masking it as political commentary or entertainment. This reflects the broader characteristics of digital hate culture, where irony and humor often conceal deeper structures of prejudice and exclusion (Nagle, 2017; Massanari, 2017). These attacks must also be situated within the wider socio-political context of the Shaheen Bagh movement. The visibility of Muslim women in sustained public protests disrupts dominant stereotypes portraying them as silent, passive, or confined to domestic space. Their occupation of roads, participation in political debate, and symbolic leadership of the anti-CAA movement challenged both patriarchal and majoritarian imaginaries of citizenship (Zia, 2020). Digital platforms have become a space where anxieties over women's public visibility and Muslim political assertion are expressed through ridicule, abuse, and moral policing. Thus, the "paid protest" narrative was not an isolated trend of online misinformation but a broader form of digital vilification aimed at weakening the legitimacy of the Shaheen Bagh Movement. The analysis of these posts indicates that social media operated simultaneously as a side of political communication and as a space where gendered and communal hostility was reproduced. In this context, online abuse functions as a mechanism of symbolic control, attempting to discipline women protesters by attacking their dignity, sexuality, and political credibility (Sobieraj, 2020).

4.2. Digital Weaponization of Misogyny: Sexualized Trolling and Mechanics of Character Assassination

The digital discourse surrounding the Shaheen Bagh movement serves as a potent case study of how social media platforms are weaponized to dismantle the credibility of women in public political spaces. Through a systematic analysis of the collected data, it becomes evident that the opposition to the

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
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protest was not merely ideological but rooted in a deeply gendered form of character assassination (Bhatia & Gajjala, 2020). The primary mechanism employed by digital trolls was the construction of a narrative centered on moral turpitude, in which the insinuation of sexual impropriety replaced the protester's political motives. By strategically deploying terms such as "night shifts" and fabricating the recovery of "contraceptives" from the protest site, digital actors attempted to transform a site of constitutional resistance into a space of perceived immorality. The strategy of "moral policing through digital fabrication" aims to shift the public gaze from the protesters' legal demands regarding the CAA /NRC to their personal "priority," thereby alienating them from mainstream social sympathy and delegitimising their presence in the public sphere (Biswas, 2023).

Furthermore, the hostility observed in these digital artifacts operates through the lens of economic humiliation and gender dehumanization. The recurring hashtag# bikau_Aurate_ Shaheen bagh _ki (sell out woman of Shaheen Bagh) and the repetitive trope of the "₹500 transaction" serve a dual function: they reduce complex political subjects to mere transactional commodities and frame their dissent as a manufactured performance (Sen & Jha, 2025). This narrative denies women any form of intellectual or political autonomy, suggesting that their presence is bought rather than born out of conviction. The specific use of communalised and gendered slurs, such as the derogatory juxtaposition of 'ammi jaan' (beloved mother) with 'dhanda' (illicit business/trade), reflects a sophisticated form of identity weaponization. Here, domestic and religious makers are subverted as a tool of abuse to inflict maximum psychological and social harm. This form of "symbolic violence" seeks to discipline women by utilizing the very patriarchal structures of "shame" and "honor" which have historically been used to confine them to the private Sphere (Krook, 2020).

The circulation of these narratives via memes and satirical posts further complicates the nature of abuse. By embedding hyper sexualized attack within the framework of "memetic satire," trolls can bypass standard social filters and normalize misogynistic speech under the guise of dark humor" (DeCook, 2018; Ozkula and Prieto-Blanco, 2026). This "linguistic violence" is particularly insidious because it camouflages deep-seated prejudice as a

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
ISSN (O): 3105-3769

political commentary, making the abuse more “shareable” and less prone to immediate censorship and removal. From an academic standpoint, this reflects a broader trend in digital hate cultures, where irony is used as a shield to perpetuate systematic exclusion (Massanari, 2017). Ultimately, the systematic targeting of the protesters' dignity and sexuality functions as a “silencing mechanism.” It is an attempt at political exclusion that utilizes character assassination to ensure that woman who disrupt traditional gender roles and majoritarian narratives are met with a digital environment so hostile that it discourages their future participation. Thus, only the “paid protest” narrative is not merely misinformation; It is a calculated effort to maintain patriarchal control over the political landscape through the symbolic annihilation of the female dissenter.

4.3. Digital Desecration: The Intersectional Siege of Shaheen Bagh

The digital vilification of the Shaheen Bagh movement was not merely an expression of political disagreement but a sophisticated deployment of gendered Islamophobia, by religious identity and gender, tropes were fused to facilitate the symbolic annihilation of Muslim female dissidents. A recurring and potent narrative within the collected digital artifacts, evidenced by posts referencing 'Abdul' (a Muslim male name) sending his 'Begum' (wife) to “bed” for a transaction, reveals the use of hyper-sexualized shaming to attack the collective morality of a community through women’s bodies. This form of “transactional misogyny” seeks to strip women of their political agency by framing their public presence as a commodified act of immorality rather than a conscious exercise of citizenship (Gajjala, 2021). By weaponizing domestic markers and religious honor, digital actors utilized the patriarchal framework of “shame” to discipline women who disrupted traditional social hierarchy. This discourse suggests that the “othering” of Muslim women in digital space operates through a unique modality of violence, where their religious visibility (the hijab or niqab) becomes a target for sexualized ridicule and communal dehumanization (Sen & Jha, 2025).

Furthermore, digital hostility created a false binary between religious devotion and constitutional loyalty. As seen in the discourse surrounding the “Asmani Kitab” (heavenly book/ divine scripture) versus the Constitution, online narratives framed the protesters not as defenders of secularism but as

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agents of religious fundamentalism. This "civilizational framing" delegitimizes the protesters by suggesting that Muslim women are incapable of possessing secular political subjectivity and are instead driven by "pre-modern" religious dictates (Mustafa, 2022). Such representation normalizes the idea that Muslim women's entry into the public sphere is inherently suspicious or part of a larger communal conspiracy. This is further intensified by troops of historical resentment evidenced in posts referencing "800 years of rule," which portrayed women as "human Shields" for their community perceived cowardice. By reducing these women to passive tools or "Shields" used by men to escape police action, the digital narratives effectively erase their subaltern agency, recasting a historical movement of female-led resistance as a patriarchal strategy of deception (Zia, 2020).

This intersectional vilification serves as a "silencing mechanism" that operates beyond the screen. The normalization of communal slurs and sexualized puns under the guise of "nationalist humor" or "dark satire" lowers the social cost of abuse, making the digital environment increasingly hostile for marginalized women. From an academic standpoint, these artifacts demonstrate that digital platforms are not merely conduits for communication but are active sites for the "securitization of identity," where the Muslim female body is transformed into a site of ideological warfare. The systematic targeting of their dignity and faith functions to maintain majoritarian control over the political landscape, ensuring that women who challenge the status quo are met with a digital "shame culture" designed to force their retreat from the public sphere back into the private domain of the ghar (Sobieraj, 2020; Krook, 2020).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research establishes that the digital vilification of the Shaheen Bagh movement was not an isolated phenomenon of online toxicity but a systematic and calculated "silencing mechanism" designed to undermine Muslim women's political agency. Through a rigorous thematic analysis of social media artifacts, the study demonstrates that digital platforms were weaponized to transform a historic movement of constitutional resistance into a site of moral and communal contention. The findings of this

ISSN (P): 3105-3750
ISSN (O): 3105-3769

research can be summarized through the following critical dimensions. First, the study identifies the construction of the "Paid Protest" narrative as a primary modality of economic humiliation. By framing the protesters as transactional commodities, often through the repetitive "₹500 trope," digital actors attempted to strip these women of their intellectual and political autonomy. This narrative effectively shifted public discourse away from the legal substance of the CAA/ NRC and toward a manufactured debate over the "authenticity" of the protesters, thereby delegitimising their presence in the public sphere. Second, the research reveals a profound intersectionality of hate, where gender and religion were refused to facilitate the symbolic annihilation of the Muslim female dissenter. The deployment of hyper-sexualized Islamophobic troops, such as the derogatory "Abdul /Begum" narratives, was designed to trigger patriarchal structures of "shame" and "honor." By targeting the moral reputation and dignity of women, digital vilification functioned as a disciplinary tool to punish those who dared to disrupt traditional social hierarchies and majoritarian imaginaries of citizenship. Third, the study finds that the use of "memetic satire" and "dark humor" served to normalize this structural Violence. By packaging communal and gender abuse within shareable digital formats such as memes, the social cost of perpetuating hate is significantly lowered. This linguistic violence has created a digital environment so hostile that it functions as a barrier to future political participation, raising the psychological cost of dissent for marginalized women and attempting to force their retreat from the public *bahir* back into the private *ghar*. Finally, this study argues that the struggle for democratic dissent in the 21st century is inseparable from the struggle against the structural violence of the digital sphere. The Shaheen Bagh case study serves as a stark reminder that, for women from marginalized communities, visibility often comes with the cost of intensified identity-based targeting. Therefore, to preserve the inclusive nature of the public sphere, it is imperative to recognize digital vilification not merely as "trolling" but as a deliberate effort to maintain patriarchal and majoritarian control over the political landscape through the symbolic destruction of the female political subject. The research points to the fact that digital platforms used on purpose gendered and communal narratives at Shaheen Bagh to claim that Muslim women protesters were immoral, manipulated, against the nation, and financially motivated, rather than seeing them as political actors that acted

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independently. Using various methods of online harassment, such as sexual trolling, moral policing, false accusations, and the common discourse of "paid protests," social media turned the focus away from the protesters' constitutional claims about the CAA, NRC, and NPR. As a result, the digital abuse changed the discourse and created character attacks against the Muslim women protesters. Moreover, there were memes, hashtags, photoshopped images, and derogatory expressions that further created an environment of misogyny and Islamophobia while diminishing women's political role.

5.1. Limitations

This study is subject to certain limitations. The analysis is confined to two platforms (Twitter and Facebook) and a specific time period (December 2019-March 2020), which may not capture the full evolution of digital vilification. The reliance on publicly available data means that private social media groups, WhatsApp forwards, and other closed platforms were not analyzed. Furthermore, this study does not include interviews with the women who were targeted, limiting our understanding of how they experienced and responded to the abuse. The sample of 200 posts, while purposively selected, may not be representative of all digital discourse.

5.2. Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study have implications for policy and practice. First, social media platforms should improve their content moderation systems to better detect and remove gendered and religious hate speech, particularly in languages beyond English. Second, legal frameworks should recognize digital vilification as a form of gender-based violence and provide accessible mechanisms for redress. Third, civil society organizations should develop support systems for women activists facing online abuse, including mental health resources and legal aid. Fourth, educational initiatives should promote digital literacy and awareness of the harms of gendered hate speech.

5.3. Future Research

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Future research should explore digital vilification of women protesters across different regional and linguistic contexts in India. Comparative studies of anti-CAA protests in different cities could reveal variations in online abuse patterns. Additionally, research should examine how targeted women experience and resist online abuse, and what forms of solidarity emerge in response. The role of platform governance and algorithmic amplification in facilitating or mitigating hate speech also warrants further investigation. Finally, longitudinal studies could examine whether digital vilification has long-term effects on women's political participation.

Endnotes

1. **Digital Vilification:** And the storm extends beyond a generic online "trolling." It refers to the systematic process of degrading an individual's social standing based on their identity markers, or of eroding their political legitimacy and the right to dissent. See Roy (2019) for further conceptualization.

2. **CAA, NRC and NPR:** The Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), alongside the proposed National Register of Citizens and National Population Register, created significant anxieties regarding constitutional equality among Indian Muslim communities and served as the primary catalyst for the Shaheen Bagh mobilization. See Salam (2020).

3. **Ghar and Bahir:** Originally a trope explored by Rabindranath Tagore, this concept of " The home and the world" has been reclaimed by South Asian feminist scholars to describe the spatial boundaries between the private and public spheres. At Shaheen Bagh, women blurred these lines by transforming domestic caregiving into public political resistance.

4. **Memetic Satire:** The use of memes and humor in the context acts as a "Trojan horse" for hate speech. It allows abusive content to bypass platform censorship filters and lowers the

social cost of vilification by masking it as "dark humor." See DeCook (2018).

5. **Symbolic Annihilation:** A term used in feminist media studies to describe the way media either ignore or negatively stereotype a group to maintain existing power imbalances and reduce that group's social influence.

6. **Identity Securitization:** This refers to the framing of a specific religious or cultural identity as a "threat" to national security or social morality, thereby justifying exceptional measures such as digital surveillance, censorship, or symbolic violence.

7. **Subaltern Agency:** Referring to the voice and power of marginalized groups, specifically Muslim woman in this context who exists outside traditional power structures yet successfully claim space and challenge dominant States and patriarchal narratives.

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