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Rise of Feminist Digital Counterpublics: A Study of Social Media Visual Content in Contemporary India

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The chief navigational space of my doctoral project is constituted by everyday visual feminist interventions on social media in post-millennial India. My research specifically addresses the newly emergent political aesthetic of visual feminism that is the result of a steady paradigmatic shift in feminist politics from 'textual discourse' to 'digital spectacle' (Mc. Keever 2013). This shift I argue is located against a larger historical turn towards everyday visualities in contemporary digital culture. Key theoretical interventions in the field of digital visibility (Mirzoeff 2015; Matteo 2017; Budka 2018, Serafinelli 2015; Hand 2018; Ibrahim 2016) provide the framework needed to historically locate the rise of an image based social media feminism in contemporary India. In investigating this fledgling aesthetic, the social media ecology remains pivotal to this study as the critical conduit for new forms of feminist formations and collectives. The 'participatory structures' and other 'architectural affordances' of 'networked publics' (Papacharizzi 2010; Boyd 2012) play a crucial role in the larger narrative of digital feminism. I use Bernadette Plummer's work on 'digital platforms as discursive resources for meaning making' (2017) to engage with Instagram, the primary field of my study as a crucial site of feminist discourse formation in present-day urban India.

Rationale and Intervention: There is an urgent need to academically engage with the voluminous amount of everyday visual, feminist social media content, as it constitutes a living archive of the contemporary feminist movement in India. This brand of feminism in its vernacular nature and everydayness speaks immediately to a younger generation of digitally literate feminists in urban India. It has led to a familiarization and intimatization of feminist politics in everyday life. It plays a major role in shaping our everyday feminist political consciousness by creating a 'visual commons' and allowing everybody to participate in contemporary contestations on gender. This world of artivism (coined from art/activism) also fascinates me for it offers a visual economy of non normative femininity that challenges dominant beauty culture. Taken together these artists offer a critique of what Rosalind Gill calls 'aesthetic labor' (2018) by contesting the dominant ideas of female beauty. This project is located within the larger disciplinary rubric of visual culture and feminist new media studies as it attempts to explore the digital feminist question from a visual studies perspective.

Selection of material: Everyday, popular visual feminist ephemera on Instagram constitute my primary research material. I intend

to use the works of a select few artists/ Instagram feminists/ activists to understand the fledgling aesthetic terrain called activist/ artistic practice, also called 'artivism' in young, digital urban India. This remains at best an ever evolving, contingent list of artists with a single shared denominator, that is, use of the digital in framing feminist political subjectivities and a consistent emphasis on 'corporeal politics' of the female body. (Baer, 2016) The shared emphasis on the improper/ alternative/non normative female body, body politics, and the relationship of the body with social media images constitutes the rationale for the selection of my visual material.

Some of the artists I take up for further study include Mumbai based Indu Harikumar whose recent work called *Identitty* (with a deliberate focus on 'titty') (2019) is a crowd sourced art project on Instagram initiating a conversation on breasts in the digital public sphere; Delhi based Aru Bose, also popularly known as the 'vagina maker' on Instagram, she openly initiates dialogue on the politics of female pleasure in online spaces. Jaipur based Lyla Freechild is known for fighting menstrual taboos through her art; Kaviya Illango's project *#100days of dirty laundry* (2018) is an honest depiction of the female body with its imperfections such as body hair, flatulence, blood work and the like. Priyanka Paul (Instagram handle 'art whoring) and Pranjal Dubey (*kalmuhi* meaning black faced, a woman with loose morals) also remain important individual feminist voices on social media. Anushka Kelkar's *Brown Girl Gazing* (2018) is an ongoing photographic project on women and their relationship with their bodies. Payal Padmanbhan's artwork on facial hair in her web comic *Her-sutism* (2019) is also important in initiating discussion on the 'normative cruelty' of the hairless body. Apart from individual activist voices, I also take up for further study the visual practices of feminist

collectives such as *Kadak* and *Kahaaniwale* known for their overtly activist projects such as '*Alpha Breasts*' (2019) and '*Acchi Ladki*' (2018) meaning the good girl respectively.

Theoretical Framework: The dominant theoretical framework for understanding the contemporary feminist movement is provided by an ever-expanding field of scholarship on the rise of 'a global, rights based fourth wave of feminism' in the global South. (Kurian 2018) I use Radhika Gajjala's conceptualization of 'gendered Indian digital publics' and 'digital streets' (2019) to understand the changing 'configurations, sites and practices' of feminist activism in digital India. There also exists a growing body of scholarship on Indian digital feminism that provides the critical framework for the present study. (Roy 2016; Kahn 2012; Gupta 2016; Murray 2018; Risam 2015; Raman 2017) Also key works from Western feminist digital humanities scholarship on redoing feminism in the digital domain such as Hester Baer (2016), Rosemary Clark (2017), Plummer (2017), Elizabeth Losh (2015) and the several others provide the necessary theorization required for a 'contextually situated feminist new media research.' (Raman 2017).

KEYWORDS

Aesthetic of visual feminism,
Activism,
Corporeal politics,
Digital India