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TRANSITIONAL MEDIATION OF WOMEN'S STRUGGLES: PLATFORM FEMINISM AND THE SUFFERING OF OTHER WOMEN

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Introduction

This research explores the tensions, complexities, and ambivalences in the work of an Iranian diasporic feminist campaign on X (formerly Twitter) and the possibilities of transnational mediation through digital platforms for (lack of) recognition and (in)visibility of feminist struggles on the ground. Situating this research within the sociopolitical context of feminist activism in the diaspora, I look at the 2017-2018 #WhiteWednesdays (#WW) hashtag campaign on Twitter, launched by a New York-based journalist and women's rights advocate, which invited women to post photos of themselves walking unveiled or wearing White headscarves on Wednesdays. This campaign, using the Orientalist trope of the veil aligned with imperial feminist discourses, exceeded beyond social media platforms and gained heightened visibility and coverage in popular media, particularly American mainstream news. In particular, from the December 2017 onwards, in light of the #GirlsofRevolutionStreen movement in Iran and against the backdrop of nationwide protests in the country fueled by dissatisfaction with economic stagnation, the White Wednesdays campaign emerged as a dominant framework for the Iranian women's movement in the American news media.

By exploring this campaign and its visibility in the mainstream news, I argue that even while the contemporary social media practices of imperial feminists are commodified and adjusted to digital platforms logic, they can still inspire acts of defiance and resistance. In this commodified and datafied space of resistance, there is a dialectic at work. These defiant practices, which can be turned into easily digestible and marketable forms of dissent and result in self-promotional resistance, can also be appropriated and repurposed by grassroots activists and radical feminists.

Theoretical Frameworks

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The research puts the frameworks of imperialist feminist and platform feminism into conversation to explore how the Orientalist trope of the veil emerges as a discursive and material metric to measure the suffering of Other women and mobilize platform feminism for women in Iran, who are under multiple of forms of systemic oppression including the compulsory hijab. The framework of imperial or colonial feminism, coined by Leila Ahmed (1992), describes how the history of British colonial interventions in the Middle East is often predicated on liberating women from their backward cultures. The famous phrase “white men saving brown women from brown men” by Gayatri Spivak (1996) refers to the very same savior narrative wherein the interventionist and imperial agendas hinge on the claim for the oppressed women’s liberation, and when it comes to Muslim majority societies, operating on the discourse of liberation from the veil.

Here, the search extends the imperial feminist framework to explore how this ideological practice operates in our era of advanced capitalism and data-driven yet interactive social media platforms. I contend that the imperial feminist framework strives for visibility and recognition by leveraging activism and resistance using digital platforms. This aligns with Sarah Banet-Weiser’s (2018) discussion of the economies of visibility, where hyper-mediated conditions offer visibility, but this visibility and recognition become “an end in itself” rather than a means to an end. However, when rely on social media platforms, platform feminist practices cannot be separated from the intervening mechanisms of social media platforms. Driven by algorithmic patterns and economic interests, social media platforms lend themselves to making feminist activism visible and accessible through likes, comments, shares, and retweets.

At the same time, the fact that media practices and feminist expressions in social media platforms can inspire divergent responses highlights a fundamental characteristic: ambivalence. Yet, ambivalence on social media activism is fraught with tensions, and contradictions (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Philips & Miller, 2017; Paasonen, 2021). In this sense, the diasporic feminist campaigns mediating while also datafying Iranian women’s liberation can go either way: inclusion and exclusion, visibility and erasure, co-optation and resistance, imperialist and radical.

To investigate these dynamics imbued within platform feminist practices on social media, my research asks: How does the transnational mediation of state gendered violence is manifested through the work of diasporic a digital feminist campaign? How do such transnational feminist campaigns and mediation processes accommodate the processes of mediatization of the suffering of the Other Muslim woman in the American media outlets/ here the Iranian?

Methodologies and Preliminary Findings

The study employs feminist digital ethnography (Brudvig, 2020), analyzing the evolution of the WW campaign alongside the Girls of Revolution Street movement along with a discourse analysis of the news surrounding these campaigns. The preliminary findings demonstrate that certain accounts act as the central nodes in the #WW campaign. Notably, these accounts frequently recycled visuals—videos of unveiled women in public spaces—with slight textual variations. While this strategy maintained visibility, it also reflected the campaign’s reliance on core accounts to sustain momentum,

indicating limited grassroots engagement. Also, despite its feminist framing, the WW campaign was not immune to patriarchal undercurrents. Calls for men to participate often appealed to traditional notions of *gheyrat* (men's honor), framing support for unveiled women as a matter of male dignity and social responsibility. This rhetoric perpetuated a patriarchal logic, emphasizing women's roles as mothers and sisters rather than autonomous individuals. Such narratives complicate the campaign's feminist objectives and illustrate the challenges of mobilizing across intersecting systems of power and oppression.

The transnational mediation of the #WW campaign through the US news outlets highlights another layer of complexity. Between May and December 2017, coverage of the campaign was sparse, with only 38 articles referencing Alinejad's efforts. These narratives often reduced the complexities of Iranian women's struggles to a binary opposition between oppression (hijab) and liberation (unveiling), perpetuating Orientalist tropes. This binary framing gained prominence following the December 2017–January 2018 protests, during which coverage of the campaign increased significantly.

However, this visibility came at the cost. American media largely decoupled women's gendered oppression from the broader economic and political grievances driving the protests. By emphasizing the bravery of Iranian women while neglecting the impact of U.S.-imposed sanctions and other structural inequalities, these narratives reinforced a racialized dichotomy between gendered and racialized suffering. This selective recognition of suffering aligns with longstanding patterns in U.S. mediatization of Muslim women's experiences. As scholars have noted, such framings often position Muslim women who adopt Western values as idealized subjects, while erasing the intersecting oppressions they face. The #WW campaign, mediated through these lenses, became a spectacle of liberation, divorced from the material realities of those it purported to represent.

Through these observations, the research demonstrates that complexities surrounding transnational mediation of Iranian women's struggles through platformized feminism. While digital campaigns like WW amplify voices and create visibility, they also risk reproducing the hierarchies they seek to challenge. The reliance on performative gestures, patriarchal rhetoric, and Orientalist framings underscores the limitations of mediated activism and highlights the need for more nuanced approaches.

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