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Twitter Trial of the Tainted Trio: Misogyny Against Activists and Celebrity Women

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Abstract

By giving voice to millions of people all around the world social media acts as a democratising agent. Any person, can share and speak out their mind, and each act of speaking-out can potentially reach thousands of people; the entire world, theoretically. However, reality as we know is far from this. The disempowered and the marginalised of the real world continue to be kept on the fringes of this information utopia – the doubly-marginalised women of the global south are one such group. This paper uses content analysis of the discourse in the content posted on Twitter against three well-known Indian women accused of different crimes. This paper seeks to explore how women, even those who may be considered empowered – celebrities and social activists – may be subjected to the abusive power of patriarchy.

Keywords: Social Media Trials, Misogyny, Online Abuse, Freedom of Speech, Gender trolling, Sexism

Introduction

According to Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution, every citizen of India has been granted the right to freedom and expression of speech. The media derives its power to publish and to broadcast from the same. Media is considered as the fourth pillar of democracy and a watchdog of society. For the smooth functioning of democracy, media plays a crucial role. It helps in the formation of public opinion, critiquing government policies and becoming the voice of the voiceless. In the era of the internet and 24x7 TV news, the media doesn't take enough precautions while presenting cases to the public, especially those that are still under trial in court. This leads to unnecessarily heated debates, sensationalism of news and the formation of a prejudiced public opinion which affects the fair trial of an accused. This media trial affects the person's image and labels him/her guilty even before the court of law arrives at a judgement.

Such media trials date back to the 20th century. The Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle (1921) case in which the accused was charged with the murder of Virginia Rappe is considered to be the first recorded case of a media trial. Later on, he was acquitted by the court but he lost his social status and his reputation due to the conduct of a parallel trial by the media. Even before the full acquittal of Fatty Arbuckle, an important statement had been made by the third jury that was "Acquittal is not enough for Roscoe Arbuckle. We feel that a great injustice has been done to him." This statement clearly indicates the horrible outcomes of parallel media trials



that can come to pass (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998). Another famous case was the case of O.J. Simpson (1995). He was a prime suspect in the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald Goldman. After the telecast of the case on cable television, most of the African-Americans came out in support of O.J. Simpson while most white Americans believed that he was guilty. On October 3, 1995, Simpson was acquitted of all charges of murder (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014). From both of these cases, it is now clear that the media has the power to control the perception of the general public, and it can mould public opinion.

Nowadays, the internet has become an integral part of our life and thus social media. We share our thoughts, opinions, views, feelings and understanding on any issue on different social media platforms. According to a recent Social media user data which is shared by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), WhatsApp has over 53 crores users, followed by YouTube which has over 44.8 crores users further followed by Facebook, Instagram and Twitter that has 41, 21 and 1.5 crores users in India respectively (Chakravarti, 2021). These users freely express their views on social media without any hesitation as they all have the right to freedom of speech and expression. But things go wrong when these users start to spread fake news, fake stories, and morphed images to assassinate the character of an accused person and start to post or promote denigrating and misogynistic content especially in the case of an accused woman without knowing the facts and try to influence the judgement through these parallel narratives that are formed on social media. Discussing "Freedom of the Press in the Digital Age", Justice A. K. Sikri commented "It is becoming very alarming but we are in the era of paid and fake news because of the digital era. Stories are created...and somebody puts it on any digital mode and these, in a few hours, become viral. The reach is a billion people" (Team DNA, 2019). This user-generated content filled with the language of hatred, bullying and trolling is used to silence women who speak for their rights. This study is further research into the language that is used on Twitter during the social media trials against the accused women whose cases are pending in a court of law.

The main objectives to conduct this research are:

1. To analyse the presence of gender-specific abuse in derogatory tweets against women.
2. To evaluate how enfranchisement becomes a double jeopardy against women in Twitter trials.
3. To obtain the themes of misogyny in Twitter trials of enfranchised women.

Review of literature

Academic and a Journalist Timothy Garton Ash makes the following claim in his 2016 book *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World* that "free speech has never meant unlimited speech – everyone spouting whatever comes into his or her head leads to global logorrhea" (Ash, 2016, P.3). But People think that in the name of free speech, they can post anything against anyone on social media and can troll other users. Many times, this trolling is converted into hate speech. Internet users frequently confuse trolling with hate speech, which makes the phenomenon problematic. Users often ignore online hate speech and mistakenly refer to racism, sexism or homophobia as "trolling" (Clucas, 2020, P. 49). We use social media platforms to keep our views or opinions on different kinds of issues in public space. Article 19 (1)(a) of the Indian Constitution provides this right to freedom of speech and expression to



every citizen of India without any gender discrimination but research conducted by Kim Barker and Olga Jurasz describes that the women who participate in political protests and struggles, face online violence and misogyny, mainly in the form of text-based content (Barker & Jurasz, 2021, P.80). Women in the spotlight are by no means the only ones who experience online abuse, but female politicians whom we consider powerful enough also suffer from it on social media platforms (Amnesty International, 2017). Online or offline, misogyny has been around for a while. It surpasses spatial and temporal limits since it is a societal issue that is firmly rooted in power systems and gendered hierarchies (stein, 2008 *cited in* Barker & Jurasz, P.79). Women frequently pay a high price for using and entering digital spaces to share their work, thoughts, opinions, and experiences. The three overlapping tactics of threatening, humiliating, and discrediting are frequently used by aggressors to silence women or reduce their influence in online communities (Sobieraj, 2017, P.1704). The definition of “Gender trolling” is “the use of gender-based insults, vicious language and credible threats (e.g., rape threats, death threats) by a coordinated group of trolls to humiliate women, particularly those who speak out” (Mantilla, 2013 *Cited in* Mendonca et. al., 2021, P.70).

While talking about the features of ‘Gender Trolling’, Mantilla writes that it includes the participation and coordinated efforts of the numerous trolls who continuously attack the victim with ‘Gender-based insults’, ‘credible threats’ or ‘vicious language’ and the intensity of such online assault has sometimes surpassed hundred such verbal attacks per hour across a certain time period (Mantilla, 2013, P.564). According to Pew Research the decline in the percentage of internet users who participated in online chats and discussion groups fell from 28% in 2000 to 17% in 2005 just because of the decline of engagement of women due to unpleasant chat room behaviour (*How Women and Men Use the Internet*, 2005). Meanwhile, University of Maryland researchers created a large number of fictitious online identities and sent these IDs into chat rooms. A daily average of 100 sexually explicit or threatening messages were sent to accounts with feminine usernames, compared to 3.7 for accounts with masculine ones (Bartlett et al., 2014, P. 3). In addition, Broadband Commission Working Group on Gender (2015) while submitting their final report describes that “73% of women have already been exposed to or have experienced some form of online violence.” This report further states that In India only 35% of women have reported their victimization; often they do not report cyber violence fearing societal reaction and consequences. Amnesty International’s 2018 report found that a variety of reasons can be attributed to women being targeted with violence and abuse on Twitter. Sometimes it is for voicing their opinions about feminist issues. In other instances, it is because of their status as public figures. While online abuse is not limited to women and is extended to all genders, women often experience sexist or misogynistic abuse including dire threats of violence and online sexualisation with explicit reference to female body parts (Amnesty International, 2018). According to Maundu, “when women are the target, online harassment quickly descends into sexualized hate or threats. Online gender-based violence is an overt expression of the deeply rooted gender inequalities in our society” (Maundu,2020). Simply ignore the trolls. Don't reveal private data. Log off. Discussions of digital communication and the online abuse and harassment that takes place are rife with these maxims (Fairbairn, 2015). From all of the reports and research, two things have been clearly highlighted: one, cases of online violence against women and girls are quite rampant. Secondly, a woman who is politically active, or is a public figure, or a woman who voices her opinions, faces online harassment in the form of sexism and misogyny expressed as abuse, bullying,



trolling, or body shaming. This study analyses the content posted on Twitter during the social media trials of select accused women.

Theoretical Framework

Cyberbullying is an “aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself”(Smith et al., 2008, P. 376). According to other scholars like Miller & Hufstedler (2009) and Beale & Hall (2007) Cyberbullying, online bullying, and/or electronic bullying are new forms of bullying that involve harassment through the use of technology, including blogs, instant messaging (IM), email, chat rooms, mobile texting and cameras, picture messages (including sexting) on social media sites like Facebook and MySpace. Anderson & Strum (2007) argues that Bullying on the computer gives the aggressor a bigger advantage, this is the reason that it has become more widespread. The bully can torment a victim at home, launch anonymous attacks, and worsen psychological damage with the knowledge that most authorities won't be able to track them down or put an end to their harassment. In contrast, a victim feels more helpless and alone and has emotional consequences that typically linger longer than a black eye (*cited in E. Notar et al., 2013, P. 2-4*).

The type of online abuse based on gender is referred to as ‘gendertrolling’ by Mantilla (2013). Mantilla's concept of "gendertrolling," which emphasises the institutionalised harassment of women based on their gender, offers a critical framework for comprehending the trends and underlying causes of this kind of online behaviour on social media platforms. Mantilla argues that online gendertrolling can take the form of doxing, which is the publication of lengthy, personal information about women online, libelling, which is the posting of slanderous or defamatory information about women, and flaming, which is participating in online debates with women in an attempt to provoke them (Paananen & Reichl, 2019, P.152). Mantilla further argues that ‘generic trolling’ can take many different forms, such as being unpleasant, disturbing, or purposefully harmful but there is a distinct pattern of abusive, threatening, or harassing behaviour that is directed specifically at women and has been increasing on the Internet. Mantilla further argues that this specific kind of abuse, threats, and harassment that women have been subjected to are a different and unique category from trolling in general, or what she refers to as "gendertrolling." In this form of trolling ladies are sometimes attacked using derogatory language such as "cunts," "sluts," "whores," and similar terms; their physical appearance is criticised with labels like "ugly," "fat," and much worse; and photographs of the targeted ladies are often used in graphic pornographic depictions (Mantilla, 2015).



Mantilla found seven basic characteristics which distinguished ‘gendertrolling’ from other forms of generic trolling. These basic characteristics are:

1. Online viewpoints expressed by women tend to trigger accusations of gendertrolling.
2. Contain derogatory remarks that are sexualized and gendered.
3. Contain (often credible) threats of rape and death, as well as regular IRL(In-Real-Life) targeting, which lends credence to the threats.
4. Use a variety of internet and social media channels.
5. The number and intensity of them are abnormally high (several threats or messages every day or even hour).
6. Continue for an atypical amount of time (months or years).
7. Engage a large number of assailants in a coordinated and well-planned effort(Mantilla, 2015, P.18)

A majority of women had faced trolling when commenting on politics or religion for their posts. One respondent alluded that gender trolling was simply because “women are always easier targets, especially women who talk about gender, feminism and equality, are targeted”. The participants spoke of the type of trolls and threats they were subjected to, ranging from bodily harm to rape to all forms of character assassination. They were also at the receiving end of name-calling and often felt like they were being “publicly lynched”. Sexist remarks and body shaming were also ways the trolls responded (Pillai & Ghosh, 2022, P.5).

Methodology

This study is based on a textual analysis of tweets in the wake of headline-making three media of women in India between April 2020 and February 2021 – a period marked by the first and the second waves of the Covid-19 pandemic. The protagonists of these media trials are as follows: Safoora Zargar, a New Delhi-based student-activist charged with and arrested under the much-criticised Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act, 2008 in April 2020; Rhea Chakraborty, a Mumbai-based film actor charged with and arrested for abetment to suicide of actor Sushant Singh Rajput in July 2020; and Disha Ravi, a Bengaluru-based climate activist charged with and arrested for sedition in February 2021. In a purposive sampling, tweets and follow-up comments targeting these women were selected for analysis. The data for the study was selected out of Tweets (including comments) that mentioned or tagged one of the three protagonists on their official Twitter handles “@SafooraZargar”, “@Tweet2Rhea”, and “@disharavii”. Only derogatory tweets were selected for the study in order to understand the nature of abuse suffered by these women.

Case studies

The Case of Disha Ravi: A Spotlight on Online Misogyny

Farmer Protests refer to a sixteen-month-long sit-in protest by lakhs of farmers, mostly from the North-Indian states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh from August 2020 to December 2021. These farmers, under the joint leadership of various farmer organisations were demanding the scrapping of three controversial laws related to “reforms” in the agricultural sector passed by the Indian Parliament in September 2020. The protests resulted in a vertical



division in the Indian society. The mainstream media, especially television news channels, along with the supporters of the ruling party toyed with building a narrative of “anti-nationals” against the protesting farmers and their supporters. The activists, journalists, celebrities and public intellectuals, who came out in support of the farmers were also branded as anti-national along with many other derogatory portmanteaus such as “libtards” (a portmanteau blending ‘liberal’ and mental ‘retards’), “presstitutes” (a blend of ‘press’ and ‘prostitute’), “sickular” (a portmanteau blending ‘sick’ and ‘secular’), and “librandu” (a blend of ‘liberal’ and ‘gandu,’ colloquial, variously used for either a coward, a good-for-nothing person, or a male accepting anal penetration). The government cracked down on such people, including a Bengaluru-based 22-year-old climate activist Disha Ravi. She, along with some others, was accused of editing and circulating a “toolkit,” i.e. a document providing “online resources to educate and amplify on the cause of a protest and what it is trying to achieve” (Times of India, 2021). The toolkit caught official attention after it was accidentally leaked by climate activist Greta Thunberg on Twitter. Ravi was charged with and arrested for criminal conspiracy and sedition on February 13, 2021, amidst the peak of farmer protests and the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was followed by a high-pitched media trial and social media trolling targeting her for being a part of an international conspiracy to discredit the Indian national government through the farmer protests.

A user tweeted, “if leftist are ugly then she is an ultra-leftist,” obviously taunting her physical appearance and ascribing political motivations for her actions. Many others were much more vicious. *Another* tweet, “...A 21 year old RANDI (emphasis in original, colloquial for a woman of questionable character) Disha Ravi Joseph Who sold its [sic.] nation for money was arrested and all the librandus are now worried about youths,” questioned her moral character, alleged personal gratifications as a motive for her actions, and discredited her supporters. The reference to age juxtaposed with the word ‘RANDI’ questioned her capacity to have such an influence at a relatively young age unless she received it in exchange for sexual gratification. Several Twitter users attacked Disha asking her to get “pregnant” to escape arrest. *A user* wrote, “So Fascist BJP government is [that they] even don’t given [sic.] a single chance to Disha Ravi for being Pregnant.” *Another user* wrote, “Disha Ravi can be released if she is pregnant”. A user tweeted, “Disha Ravi.....In case you aren’t pregnant, it is good time to immediately get it done.” *Another user* advised, “Get Pregnant like Safoora [.] Swara will save you.” Swara, or Swara Bhaskar, is an Indian mainstream actress known for her public statements and outspoken liberal stance on several important issues, winning her as many, if not more, ideological opponents, for her approximately two million followers on Twitter. The reference to becoming ‘pregnant’ is a sarcastic take on the fact that when Safoora Zargar (discussed later) was arrested, she was pregnant. In her support, Swara Bhaskar (05 June 2020), from her Twitter handle @ReallySwara tweeted, “BUT a pregnant woman is in jail for blocking a road!!!! What have we become??? #safoorazargar”. At the time of her arrest, Safoora Zargar, was pregnant. The advice to “immediately get it [pregnancy] done,” reeks of insinuation. The viciousness in these posts is laid bare in other such tweets. *A user* posted, “Disha Ravi is a single mother. Maybe pregnant now. Keeps environment nice and friendly”. The reference to ‘single mother’ points to the taboo in Indian society associated with a pregnancy resulting from sex outside marital relationships. While Disha Ravi was indeed unmarried at the time of her arrest, Safoora Zargar was in fact married at the time of her arrest. However, rumours were rampant about her being an unmarried pregnant woman at the time, and she was viciously trolled for the same. In calling Disha Ravi a ‘single mother’ the user questions her moral character. Along with taking an oblique dig at the helplessness of the ‘liberals’ in not being able to campaign for her freedom



on the grounds of pregnancy, the tweet also insinuates that owing to her questionable moral standards, she may have already indulged in sexual intercourse while in captivity. This insinuation is underlined in the next line where the tweet says “keeps environment nice and friendly.” The use of the word ‘environment’ is as seeped in sarcasm about her climate activism as in insinuation to her body. The adjectives ‘nice’ and ‘friendly’ in this sentence suggest that she uses her body as bait for inviting sexual intercourse. Another user tweeted after her arrest, “Medical test[s] are out doctor says will be pregnant by morning,” besides mocking the unavailability of the grounds of pregnancy in an appeal for leniency, also alleging that Disha is capable of having sexual intercourse just to become pregnant and thus appeal for leniency.

Safoora Zargar Case : Unveiling Intersectional Harassment and Online Sexism

On February 23, 2020, communal riots broke out across the capital city of New Delhi. These riots were a culmination of a series of political events since December 2019, which started with the passage of the Citizenship Bill in the Indian Parliament. The Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA) allows for Indian citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians, Jains and Parsis from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan fleeing religious persecution if such refugees have come to India in or before December 2014. The exclusion of Muslims was seen as discriminatory against Muslims already residing in India. The source of this threat was the proposal of the Indian government to implement the National Register of Citizens (NRC) – an official record of legal Indian citizens. Under the provisions of the NRC, illegal immigrants in India could be identified, detained and deported. The opponents of the CAA alleged that both CAA and NRC working together were discriminatory against Muslims, as under CAA Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Jains and Parsis immigrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh could be granted citizenship, but not Muslims. Indian Muslims also feared that failing to furnish adequate proof of citizenship would lead to their being deemed illegal. As a result, protests broke out across the nation against CAA with several demonstrations held in key cities. Many University students, including those from Jamia Milia Islamia in New Delhi, also joined the protests. In December 2019, Delhi police entered the Jamia Milia Islamia campus to disperse anti-CAA protesters in the campus. The incident further fuelled nationwide protests. Finally, in the run-up to the Delhi Assembly Elections of 2020, political leaders of the ruling party equated CAA protesters to being anti-nationalists, traitors and nation haters. The protests reached a peak with many roads in the national capital New Delhi blocked by the protesters. The pro-CAA lobby organised a rally at Maujpur Chowk, to show support for the CAA, leading to the first outbreak of widespread violence. Soon after, in February 2020, violent clashes broke out between anti- and pro-CAA demonstrators in Northeast Delhi resulting in riots at various locations, including Jaffrabad (Business Standard, 2020). After that, a 27-year-old M.Phil. student of Jamia Milia Islamia Safoora Zargar was arrested and charged with the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act in a case related to the Delhi riots of February 2020. She was one of the key leaders of the Jamia protests. She was arrested for allegedly inciting violence with her inflammatory speeches on 23 February 2020 at Jaffrabad which led to riots in Delhi. Upon her arrest, her medical examination revealed that she was pregnant. This information was leaked in the media, along with her marital status as ‘single’ (This was especially malicious as media reports (Chaudhary, 2020) later revealed that she was married). Immediately after, her social media trial started.

A user wrote, “Safoora Zargar the Shahin bagh rioter is pregnant, and father of the baby is unknown.” Another user tweeted, “During the last day of Shaheen Bagh she must have



forgotten to use the condom now Azadi will be given to her nazayaz [illegitimate] child.” Both tweets not only question her moral character but also target her unborn child’s legitimacy. In fact, while it links her pre-marriage pregnancy to the taboo of premarital sex, the claim that the father is “unknown” and the suggestion “she must have forgotten to use the condom” also alleges Safoora with indiscriminate sexual promiscuity. Notably, while Zargar was arrested for charges of instigating violence in Jaffrabad, a Northeast Delhi neighbourhood, she was constantly linked to the protests in Shaheen Bagh, a locality in South Delhi. The anti-CAA protests at Shaheen Bagh garnered national and international limelight for a 100-day 24x7 sit-in protest led by Muslim women. The peaceful demonstration was marked by its use of the national anthem as a song of protest and creative sloganeering, including a slogan for *Azadi* (freedom), which calls for freedom from all kinds of injustice and oppression. Shaheen Bagh emerged as the symbol and fulcrum of anti-CAA protests throughout the country. The claim that “...Azadi will be given to her nazayaz child” not only mocks the slogan for freedom but also seeks to transfer the perceived immorality of birthing a child out of wedlock to the *Azadi* slogan and associated liberal ideology, thereby discrediting both. The sexual innuendo becomes crass when *a user* tweets, “Fuck Kashmiri Randi safoora zargar jisko bhi is randi safoora ka mms chahiye msg kro” (Trans. [Here’s a chance to] have sex with Kashmiri whore Safoora Zargar. Anyone who wants whore Safoora’s sex video may message me). Another user claimed, “#Safoora_Zargar Randi hai” (Safoora Zargar is a whore). Labelling her a whore while being sexist is problematic at a more sinister level – it is also a ploy to discredit her socially and politically. Also, the offer to distribute her personal explicit video is problematic at several levels: one, it claims that it exists; two, that it is already in the public domain; and three, that it can be shared with anyone who wants it. All this is also a threat to disenfranchise her (and others like her) by announcing that she is fair game for objectification and public ridicule, despite the laws against sharing personal explicit videos. The message also evokes hatred against Kashmiri Muslims, many of whom have been engaged in a struggle with the Indian state for a right to self-determination for Kashmir. That Safoora belongs to the state of Jammu and Kashmir was also used against her to attribute anti-nationalism on her part – a double jeopardy resulting from being a Muslim and a Kashmiri. This is amplified in a tweet by *a user* “#Safoora Zargar needs to abort the Napak (Trans. unholy) terrorist growing in her womb before Indian Army is forced to kill him”. Being a vocal protestor of the CAA earned Zargar the label of being an anti-national. That she is a Kashmiri and a Muslim extends the argument to imply that she is a terrorist, a reference to Kashmiris engaged in an armed struggle against the Indian state. The tag is extended to her unborn child, who is labelled napak (unholy), the insinuation being that the child conceived out of wedlock is illegitimate along with the fact that the child being a Muslim is a potential terrorist, thus fit to be killed by the Indian army. The reference to her womb is also an insinuation of the sinful sexual alliance the child is a result of. The reference to the Indian army killing a potential terrorist reinforces the anti-national label forced on Safoora. It also is symbolic of the ultimate victory of patriarchal and chauvinist forces on female liberation. Upon her bail, a tweet by *a user*, “...Safoora Zargar is an anti-national saali chhut gayi (Safoora Zargar is an anti-national [.] saali (a slur) is free)” sought to fossilise the label of anti-nation in the public opinion. The tweet also called her *saali* (literally, a term used for one’s wife’s sister, but colloquially used as a slur against women, insinuating easy availability for sex); once again questioning her sexual promiscuity, and through this, her moral and social credibility. The tweet also expresses disappointment at her release, despite the fact that the bail was granted to her by the judicial court after a due and diligent legal process.



Rhea Chakraborty Case : The Confluence of Media Mockery and Online Sexism

On June 14, 2020, in Mumbai, Bollywood star Sushant Singh Rajput was found dead in his flat, hanging from the ceiling fan. The Mumbai Police initially looked into the case before handing it over to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The Mumbai Police's initial investigations led them to the conclusion that the actor had committed suicide. Asphyxia from hanging was determined to be the cause of death in a preliminary post-mortem. The media soon connected the actor's death and that of his former assistant Disha Salian, who passed away merely six days earlier. The media claimed that the two were murdered and a conspiracy to hide the murders was afoot. Soon afterwards, Rajput's father KK Singh, in a media statement, claimed that his actress girlfriend Rhea Chakraborty had murdered his son through slow poisoning. A media trial began from that point on, where major news networks raised questions over the late actor's post-mortem report and ligature marks around his neck. Without evidence, Rhea Chakraborty was accused of hooking the late actor to drugs and peddling illegal drugs. On July 25, 2020, Rajput's father filed a complaint with the police in his home state of Bihar accusing Rhea Chakraborty, her family, and Rajput's domestic workers charging them of abetment to suicide (not murder). He had claimed in the FIR that Rhea had illegally siphoned off millions from the late actor's bank account, leaving him with no other option but suicide (India Today, 2022). The media peddled a series of conspiracy theories, including that Sushant was targeted and murdered for speaking out on nepotism in Bollywood. Rhea Chakraborty was accused of being a "wannabe" and a mistress of Bollywood bigwigs, most notably film director Mahesh Bhatt. She was accused of being a part of a nexus of sex, money and illegal drugs that went around at Bollywood parties and social events. She was also labelled a gold-digger.

A Twitter user wrote, "I am sorry but Rhea Chakraborty is qualified to be called as Whore!" Another Twitter user wrote "how come that cheap whore #Rhea Chakraborty could hire such an expensive criminal lawyer? Whose money? She must rot in jail bitch." As observed in the previous two cases, Chakraborty too was called a whore, discrediting her morally and professionally; here, the implication is that she extended sexual favours for money and connections in the film industry. Another insinuation here is that she was in the relationship with Rajput only for his money, otherwise, she couldn't be paying her lawyers. The reference to an "expensive criminal lawyer" also suggests that she must be guilty of the alleged crimes for she did not hire just any lawyer, but an "expensive" one. Even though the legal procedures were still underway, social media users had confirmed her guilty of causing Rajput's death and demanded that she be punished. This can also be observed in other tweets as well: *A user wrote*, "Bloody Kutti Rhea Chakraborty kutiya ne sab kiya hai" (Bloody bitch Rhea Chakraborty[!] The bitch planned everything) and wrote "Rhea Chakraborty is a slut just find her and hang her. Want Justice." The phrase 'planned everything' further highlights the users' perception of Chakraborty being evil and manipulative. *Another user wrote*, "...he [Sushant Singh Rajput] was murdered due to that whore Rhea Chakraborty." Using adjectives such as 'slut,' 'whore,' and 'kutti' (bitch) further undermine her moral, and thus professional credibility, and strengthens the claim of using her own sexuality to get Rajput's money. A user tweeted, "Dictionary amendment Whore = Rhea Chakraborty..." and "Karan Johars' new award line: the whore, the vamp and the on stage bichch (bitch, deliberately misspelt) the year Awards! All won by: Rhea Chakraborty." *Another user's tweet*, "Sali Rhea Chakraborty Mahesh Bhatt ki rakhel kutiya" (*Sali* (A spelling variation of the slur Saali used for Safoora Zargar) Rhea



Chakraborty bitch is Mahesh Bhatt's mistress); and *A user* tweets, "Bloody Bitch.... You gold digger, Prostitute, whore Rhea Chakraborty[.] you will be soon finished," both, question Rhea's moral and professional credibility along with alleging that she used sexual favours to not only have access to wealth but also to her clout with influential Bollywood directors like Mahesh Bhatt and Karan Johar and build her career. In calling her Mahesh Bhatt's mistress, the tweet establishes her as a plaything of the patriarchy. In a tweet, *a user* claimed, "Evil Rhea Chakraborty is not dating anyone she is an [sic.] slut[.] for money [and] luxury she [will] do anythingaage (in future) she will understand the life of slut..." While explicitly calling her evil, the tweet further explains, why. The explanation is that she is manipulative, and like a common prostitute, she uses sexual favours for money and the luxuries of life. This claim exacerbates the earlier narrative of being a gold-digger and being in a relationship for money. Here, the aspersion is that she doesn't need a relationship as a ruse to get others' money, but just goes ahead and uses her body for it. That's why the claim, further says, she's bound to face Karmic justice and be punished as a common prostitute. *A user* wrote that "Rhea Chakraborty Madarchod.....Tum patna aakar aakar dikha re Randi ki aulad" (Rhea Chakraborty motherfucker. . . try and enter Patna you daughter of a prostitute). This threatening tweet not only warns her of dire consequences in case Rhea was to ever go to Patna (the capital of Raput's home state Bihar) but also casts aspersions on her. The tweet goes a step further than the rest, by questioning her mother's moral character and her own legitimacy, i.e. suggesting that Rhea is an illegitimate child born out of wedlock, and thus a deservedly unworthy woman. The words 'whore,' 'bitch,' '*sali*,' 'gold digger,' 'prostitute,' 'mistress,' and 'vamp' are all variations to establish that Rhea used sexual favours to influence influential people for success and fame, while Sushant, a small-town boy was their innocent victim.

Analysis

In a patriarchal society, the role of women is fixed. Whenever a woman tries to transgress her role which has been defined by social norms, the struggle between men and women begins. This struggle is a struggle for dominance, power and influence in society. This struggle creates tension between both these genders. To maintain their dominance in society men start to subjugate women by the use of misogyny, sexism and objectification of females as a tool of suppression. This may be seen as a process of socially transforming women from 'subjects' to 'objects'. Objects are always used to derive pleasure or consumption. An object has no right to speak for itself. As a result of this, the body of the woman (the physical object) becomes the battleground of all discourses. People that possess a patriarchal mind-set start using a language rife with sexist remarks and misogyny with the intent to subjugate women. Observing the case studies that have been discussed above, we can analyse the cases based on feminist theories which will give an overview of why these women are targeted for being a woman.

In an interview, American law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, who first used the phrase in 1989, described 'intersectional feminism' as "a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other"(UN Women, 2020). We can use the lens of 'intersectional feminism' to analyse the case of Safoora Zargar. In her case she became more vulnerable to online misogyny and faced more hatred and derogatory remarks from the twitter users because of being a 'Kashmiri-Muslim-Woman' which is an intersection of her 'Regional identity', 'Religion' and 'Gender'.

In her case, Safoora is a woman, the sexism and misogyny she faced online is an example of patriarchal beliefs that aim to marginalise and suppress women's voices in society.



Secondly, because Safoora is a Muslim, online sexism directed against her is Islamophobic. Online trolls usually target Muslim women in particular, attacking their advocacy and silencing them with sexist and racist words. In addition, Safoora is a Kashmiri Muslim too which is associated with her Regional Identity. Kashmiri Muslims are often targeted online and labelled as ‘terrorists’ on Twitter. Being a Kashmiri Muslim increases her vulnerability on Twitter. This intersection of gender, region and religion clearly demonstrates various types of online sexism and misogyny that women from marginalised communities experience on Twitter. An intersectional feminist analysis is essential in this case to comprehend the interconnected nature of ‘gender’ and ‘religion’ and ‘region’ which made Safoora more vulnerable to online misogyny and sexism compared to others.

Another phenomenon that plays an important role in the analysis of these cases is “networked misogyny” which is described as “an especially virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women in online environments” (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016, P. 171). All three cases have been subjected to “networked misogyny”. For their suspected participation in certain political and social concerns, women were singled out and insulted in all three incidents on social media. Safoora Zargar, a student activist and a Research scholar of Jamia Millia Islamia was the target of harsh criticism and vitriol, with many people calling her names and even threatening to rape her. Similarly, Bollywood actress Rhea Chakraborty was also demonised and held accountable for the actor Sushant Singh Rajput's death, which resulted in her detention in a drug-related case. She experienced harassment, threats, and abuse online, and many people published untrue rumours and theories about her. In a similar fashion, Disha Ravi was also the target of internet harassment, with several individuals hurling insults and threats at her due to their gender and perceived engagement in particular political and social concerns. From all of this, we can conclude that women in all three cases were a victim of “networked misogyny”.

Apart from “networked misogyny” and “intersectional feminism”, “hostile sexism” can be used as a framework to analyse all three cases with a feminist lens. “Hostile sexism” seeks to “justify male power, traditional gender roles, and men’s exploitation of women as sexual objects through derogatory characterizations of women” (Glick & Fiske, 1997). It can be seen in the cases of Rhea Chakraborty, Safoora Zargar and Disha Ravi. These ladies were frequently targeted by derogatory and discriminatory remarks because of their gender and alleged transgressions of traditional gender roles.

In the case of Safoora Zargar, she experienced a lot of internet harassment following her imprisonment, including threats of sexual assault and gender-based insults. We can see these types of remarks as an illustration of hostile sexism since it shows disdain for women and a conviction that they do not deserve the same rights and liberties as males. In the case of Disha Ravi, by calling her 21-year-old Randi they not only question her character but also questions her intelligence and decision-making capacity. These kinds of remarks reveal a negative viewpoint towards women and a conviction that they are beneath males. In a similar pattern, this can be observed in the case of Rhea Chakraborty. Twitter users questioned her character, and some remarks also accused her of being manipulative and immoral. This type of response on Twitter is also a sign of hostile sexism since it implies views against women and a propensity to hold them accountable for the deeds of males.

When we talk about the commonalities in all of the three case studies discussed earlier in this paper, we find out that all three women Disha Ravi, Safoora Zargar and Rhea Chakraborty are independent women. Disha is a climate activist, Safoora is a political activist and Rhea is a Bollywood actress. Being public figures, they have the capability to raise their



voice freely in the male-dominated ecosystem. As Bell Hooks wrote “For women within oppressed groups . . . coming to voice is an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject.” (Hooks *cited in* Storey, 2021, P. 138). Thus, with the act of “raising their voice”, these women transform from being an ‘object’ to ‘subject’. This means that these women are independent and capable individuals and hold some degree of social and political influence – this itself is a challenge to patriarchy.

When we analyse all the words that were posted on Twitter against Disha, Safoora and Rhea. We come to the conclusion that the word ‘Randi’ was used against all three women which means that they use their bodies as a commodity for favours. Some other words like ‘single mother’ were also used in the posts against Disha Ravi and Safoora Zargar, in order to prove that they both are women of immoral character and their children are the result of pre-marital sex which is morally frowned upon. In the case of Rhea Chakraborty words like ‘mistress’ and ‘gold digger’ were used in Twitter posts against her which point to a patriarchal mind-set that dictates that women are incapable of building successful careers and creating wealth for themselves on their own. In other words, a woman needs a man to provide for her and a woman seeks a man only to take advantage of his riches. When these words are viewed from a broader perspective, they clearly relate to the age-old norms of sexual repression. As a dominant gender in society, men seek to regulate and restrict a woman’s sexuality in order to maintain their power and control. Patriarchal norms aren’t restricted to controlling a woman’s social conduct, behaviour, or attire. They also perpetuate the right of a man over a woman’s body as well as restrict women from seeking pleasure by associating sex and sexuality with immorality; and sex, outside the institution of marriage, is labelled as a shameful act. Whenever a woman tries to break these norms and tries to take control over her sexuality and starts seeking pleasure from it, then patriarchy marks the woman as a ‘Randi’ (slut, whore). These terms suggest that a woman always indulges in sexual activities only to gain favours from a man or vice-versa implying that she has nothing to offer a man (or society) except her body. If she is receiving any support from a man, then she must be indulging in sexual activities with that man.

We can’t deny the fact that in numerous instances women also act as a propagator of patriarchal norms and use sexist and misogynistic language against other women who break defined social norms and structures. It comes from the cultural conditioning of women, which is continuously done by the patriarchal society due to which their thoughts align with patriarchal goals. Social media represents a virtual replica of the physical world – it thus replicates not just societal structures but also behaviour and mind-sets which is why we see the same patriarchal behaviour being demonstrated by social media users.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the realities and grave repercussions of abuse in an online ecosystem through the notable case studies of Disha Ravi, Rhea Chakraborty and Safoora Zargar. In the case of Disha Ravi, where she faced backlash, for her environmental activism exposes the misogynistic attacks that women in the public eye often endure to undermine their credibility and stifle their voices. In the same pattern, Rhea Chakraborty’s portrayal in the media and on social media platforms during the investigation into Sushant Singh Rajputs death highlights the character assassination and tendency to blame women as victims. Safoora’s ordeal of enduring harassment while pregnant shows the intersectional



nature of online misogyny, where personal attributes like religion and pregnancy further exacerbate the assault. By analysing these cases through the lens of Mantilla's concept of 'gendertrolling' it has become clear that social media users use language full of abusive words, and hatred, and often make sexist remarks against a woman who is famous or is a celebrity or one who speaks for herself. Sometimes this online misogyny transcends individual incidents and reflects deeper cultural problems that supports online violence and gender discrimination in the digital realm. The fourth wave of feminism, which is the most recent one, primarily focuses on online misogyny, body shaming, sexist imagery and other online harassment on social media. Despite facing a lot of outrage from women journalists, feminists, women right activists and social workers, online harassment and misogyny is still prevalent on the internet. From the cases that have been discussed in this study earlier, it can be clearly observed that how these three women were treated unfairly in an online ecosystem simply because they are women. This shows that misogyny and patriarchy are deeply rooted in our consciousness. Recent research on online violence and harassment against women and girls provides data on how many girls face misogyny on the internet and different social media platforms but are unable to share the contents of misogynistic language used. Current findings and case studies suggest that the language which is used during the social media trial against the accused women – who by law are supposed to be 'innocent till proven guilty' – is highly misogynistic and sexist. This misogynistic language includes body shaming, slut-shaming and textual violence. Along with this, social media users try to silence an accused woman, do not listen to her side of the story and declare her guilty before the judgement of the court.

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