

# Benazir Bhutto, Negotiating Politics Amidst Misogyny: A Study of Daughter of the East

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## Abstract:

The present research paper analyzes the struggles of Benazir Bhutto as detailed in her autobiography, *Daughter of the East* (1987), highlighting her confrontations with political challenges, a dictatorial regime, and numerous hardships in her quest to restore and strengthen democracy in Pakistan. Bhutto navigated adverse circumstances, including male chauvinistic politics, orthodox religious ulamas, entrenched military dictatorship, and bureaucratic elitism. The paper delves into her political challenges, patriarchal social obligations, and Islamic ideological commitments, which she managed as the first woman Prime Minister of Pakistan during her tenures from 1988-1990 and 1993-1996. This era is critical to understanding her efforts to extract Pakistan from military dictatorship's grip, vividly portrayed in her autobiography. Her eloquent narrative not only chronicles her ascent as the first female Prime Minister of a Muslim-majority country but also encapsulates the relentless adversities she faced as a woman in a deeply patriarchal society. Bhutto's poignant reflections on her political odyssey inspired me to delve deeper into her life, illuminating her as a warrior in real sense and a paragon of female fortitude amidst a turbulent political landscape.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Identity politics, Intersectionality, Gendered narratives, Resistance literature, Agency, Subaltern voices, Autobiographical analysis, Discourse analysis

The present research paper aims to analyze the struggle of Benazir Bhutto in the light of her autobiography, *Daughter of the East* (1987), reflecting the ways she confronted political challenges, dictatorial regime and hardships for restoration and strengthening democracy in Pakistan. She did so amidst the adverse circumstances such as male chauvinistic politics, orthodox religious ulamas, entrenched military dictatorship and bureaucratic elitism. The paper will also analyse her political challenges, patriarchal social obligations and Islamic ideological commitments which she managed as the first woman Prime Minister of Pakistan. Thus, the period of Benazir Bhutto's premiership, during both her tenures (1988-90 and 1993-96), is an important era to understand her efforts to restore democracy in Pakistan and taking the state out of the clutches of military dictatorship, which she has well portrayed in her autobiography.

Understanding the autobiography requires unfolding of cultural practices in the form of belief systems dominating social and political arena. Since autobiography of Bhutto primarily focuses on the political ambit and her effort in setting up democratic politics, the term Democracy and its assumption about inclusion and allocation of power rights to participate in making collective decisions must be considered. Democracy, a popular and highly deliberated system of government in civil societies, has

become an objective of maximum countries to be achieved around the world. It is the governing system of a state which provides freedom and rights to each and every individual without any prejudice and further designates the equality amongst all. Hence, democracy endeavors to bring about equality and representation of every individual in decision making walk of life. According to the definition given by Merriam Webster “Democracy is a government in which supreme power is vested in people and is exercised by them, directly or indirectly through the system of representation” (“democracy”). This explanation of “democracy” is assumed to serve women well, but the historical record shows that democratic transitions do not necessarily bring about women’s participation and rights: relevant examples are Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, Algeria and the elections that brought about an Islamist party (FIS) in 1990/91, and the situation in Iraq and the Palestine, where elections in early 2006 brought to power, governments committed more to religious norms than to rights of citizen and of women in particular.

In Pakistan, there is a giant threat to the women empowerment on the grounds of security issues such as extremism in the name of religion, limited mobility and lack of resources, access to education and political expression. As stated by Anita M. Weiss, a well known Pakistani Writer on social development and gender issues in *Moving Forward with the Legal Empowerment of Women in Pakistan* (2012):

Culture and religion are inextricably intertwined in many ways in Pakistan, and there is a great deal of confusion over where lines can be drawn between them... things not in accordance with cultural norms, values, or practices are often considered as contradicting Islam.(3)

Hence, the complex interplay of culture and religion restricts the power of women because most of anti-governmental organizations take the plea of religion for propagating strictures against women. At the same time, paradoxically, under patriarchy the male martyrs, themselves pave the way for their daughters/ wives and their extreme sacrifices provide power to elite women and society accepts and supports the rule of women. It establishes that “The patriarch’s support bestows power and prestige on the daughter, facilitates her presence in the public domain and legitimates her political authority and activities, thus working to silence her detractors, is a paradox of patriarchy” (Haeri). This contradicting and conflicting approach facilitates the acceptance of woman in politics. Benazir Bhutto, daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is a stunning example of women gaining power through familial ties. She was the first female to lead a post-colonial Muslim state, who not only managed to transcend the constraints of her gender but also became the elected prime minister of the country twice.

Despite all the odds, Benazir Bhutto made her way to Prime Minister’s chair, a coveted position. Although, her father’s contribution in consolidating PPP and sacrificing his life for the cause of democracy has also been one of the most important factors in getting this position yet her own efforts and sacrifices could not be ignored. As in Islamic countries, the paths to such offices are paved by the kinship bond with the influential male members of the family, Bhutto’s political journey started into the foot of her father’s martyrdom. According to Farida Jalalzai, a Professor and Chair of Political Science at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, in her analysis on the representation and behavior of women and minorities in politics and the role of gender in the political arena, titled *Women and Politics* (2004) noted that women are often in cultural contexts where “the family as opposed to the individual, is supreme, family and kinship form the basis for political identity, and politics is a family affair” (150). It refers that family exposes woman to politics and similarly Bhutto’s hired knowledge of politics not only provided her political wisdom but also became a guide map for her for fight. In her autobiography, Bhutto describes how her father encouraged her “to feel part of the greater world”(47). At a young age,

she learned to be committed to her country. Bhutto explains how she felt “great pride” (46) as a child for her family’s heritage as descendants of the leaders of the Bhutto tribe, which boasts over a hundred thousand members and dates back to the Muslim invasion of India in the thirteenth century. Like other leaders from political families, her narrative conveys a sense of ownership of the land and people. This suggests both an entitlement to lead and as a habit associated with the ruling class.

Gender affects the women leaders as their gender still obstructs their full acceptance in the male world of politics. Therefore, her maneuver in the political seas proved to be more difficult than expected because she was a woman. When she was elected, many from the religious elite protested, claiming that a woman cannot be the head of Pakistan, in resonance with teachings in the Quran. “They legitimize this referring to the Quran’s teaching that women are only worth half a man on the witness stand” (Minai 69). Religion plays a critical role in building collective cultural identities. Therefore, sacred text’s representation promotes discourses about gendered roles, norms, and behaviour in the society.

A new discursive space began to open up in society with Benazir Bhutto’s entry into politics, a fatwa was issued stating that “as the prime minister is not the emir or the head of the state (i.e. president), who must be a man, but is rather the head of a political party” (Weiss 439), yet she managed to create specific relationship between women and political work and she was the first ever female Prime Minister of a Muslim state. Women in position of power try to facilitate the enactment of gender oriented measures and at the same time they continue to focus on the traditional national security interests and are unable to pursue gender-specific policies while in office. Author David Close in *Politics, Power, and the Common Good: An Introduction to Political Science* (2017) contends:

...a female president or prime minister frequently has not spelled good times for a country’s women’s movement. The most powerful and successful female heads of government in the twentieth century, Indira Gandhi of India and Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, may have inspired other women to enter politics and certainly showed male politicians that they did not hold a monopoly on toughness and cunning, but neither could be styled a great defender of feminist values. Indeed, women political leaders have not been exceptionally strong defenders of women’s rights.(79)

This inability may be due to multiple issues to be addressed during the office and in such cases, if a woman leader propagates women issues intensely, it may not be palatable for the men folk also. To adopt gender specific policies is practically not possible because of environmental factors and above all due to diverse issues of national and international interests.

Benazir Bhutto has narrated her experiences in her autobiography, highlighting the political moments while reflecting on her own political agency. However, Bhutto’s voice, on stereotypical issues of politics, is missing because her representation is through alternative selves. Ayse Durakbasa, a sociologist asks a question in her study on autobiographies about Benazir’s voluntary escapism “How can I possibly hear her? Where the alternative selves to this icon are, Are they hiding or can some clues to them be found”(160)? Durakbasa points out the repressed inner self of Benazir who adopts this deliberate amnesia and proclaims her national identity above her individuality. While commenting on identity, Michel Foucault does not set the subject free to do just anything. Foucault insists that individual’s practices [of self] are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. He comments about “these practices are patterns that one finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group (Foucault 1982,122). This claims that the history of an individual is an important factor of identity formation and amidst the constraining social field, individual could achieve freedom and thus overcomes the limitations which

come in the way of self mastery. Bhutto also tries to manage relations and make use of strategies to overcome the power dimensions and establishes her individuality. She writes in the preface of the autobiography:

Despite the difficulties and sorrows, however I feel blessed that I could break the bastions of tradition by becoming Islam's first elected woman Prime Minister....it proved that Muslim woman could be elected prime minister, could govern a country and could be accepted as a leader by both men and women. (xi)

Bhutto broke the stereotypes and her statement marks her individuality. Foucault also notes that there are two types of technologies –technologies of power and technologies of the self and both are hardly separate as there is constant interaction between the two. Foucault stresses that when one wants to analyze the process of the constitution of the subject, he:

...has to take into account the interaction between those two types of techniques –techniques of domination and techniques of the self. He has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where the technique of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination (Foucault 203)

According to Foucault, technologies of power determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination and technologies of the self permit individuals to act by their own means or with the help of others in a certain number of operations on their bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct, and the way of being, so as to transform themselves. This means social structures shape people's life and set the rules or procedures to be followed and hence determine conduct of individuals. Individuals are subject to the institutionalized setting of social behaviour. Similarly Bhutto was able to manage the forces that dominated and subjugated her amidst the misogynistic political world and she adapted herself to benefit in it. She uses her words in a judicious way to represent her ideas as she writes, "you can imprison a man, but not an idea. You can exile a man, but not an idea. You can kill a man, but not an idea"(86). This proclamation by Bhutto seems to be negotiating between technologies of power and technologies of the self.

Bhutto's life depiction is successful in evoking the reader's sympathy, but it is difficult to establish an emphatic reading, in which the reader may re-live the narrated events under the skin. The imagination of reader is restricted and Bhutto's enigmatic figure dwells itself under the burden of consciousness. As autobiography is a writing back strategy especially for women of position, the writer feels the contradictory pulls of restraint and commitment to truth. Bhutto points about "the redemptive possibilities available to Pakistani women and the triumphant proclamation of Bhutto's ability to lead the Pakistani nation" (Boynton 521), yet she seems to be flaunting her political image and her involvement with the national issues only. This undermines her personal life because she projects herself through the binoculars of societal perception. At the same time, as Usha Bande has rightly pointed out in *Writing Resistance: A Comparative Study of the Selected Novels by Women Writers*(2006) that Benazir Bhutto's tone changes from "mild self-castigating introspection to the more overt and strident denouncement of the oppressive hegemonic tactics" (20). This tactic adopted by Benazir has helped Bhutto to emerge as progressive and enlightened thinker, writer and feminist. Hence, it can be argued that Pakistani women are "constantly pushing the boundaries of autobiographical narration" and "many women, by the very act of writing, challenge the limitations imposed on them by tyrannical social strictures" (Boynton 521). It shows that women cannot account their life liberally as they are under a constant peril of societal abomination in case of any controversial portrayal. The patriarchal ideological

dictates restrict the women from ripping open the constrictions and thus protective encasing is supposedly designed by the writers to shelter themselves from the harsh world outside. Here in case of Bhutto also, self-censorship has an encumbering effect on her and it prevents her from being candid and honest. The quest for self-expression, self-realization and self-construction manifests itself in manipulated form thus hiding her true self.

Because dominant orientations of different societal institutions do not allow them to take up sensitive issues related to women empowerment, the share of power is to be ushered from men's domain. Benazir Bhutto clearly outlines her policies and agenda in the book entitled *Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy and The West* (2008). Besides detailing the gripping account of her final months in Pakistan, she offers a bold new agenda for how to deal with the tide of Islamic radicalism and rediscover tolerance and justice, the values that in her opinion lie at the heart of religion. She has addressed to the West as well as to Muslims across the globe. She accounts her first months in 1988; her goals, what she accomplished and what stood in her way and her time in office in 1993. She is candid about what she wanted to do, what her priorities were, what she accomplished and what had to be cast aside and for what reason. During her premiership, she was not able to fulfill her promises; she was not able to bring about that much of the social justice and the rule of law to the country. During her trip to the United States, in an interview with Charlie Rose, she explained the kind of society she has to deal with.

...it was a society in which Islamic law permits an eighty years old man to marry a nine years old girl in return for unpaid debts her parents owe him; in which women have been pushed into the cruel laws of "Marriage to Koran" just to keep them out of actual marriage to prevent the ownership of land transfer to another family; in which you cannot even report rape in a newspaper, for it is considered obscene; in which rape victims are indeed punished as fornicators; in which she was not permitted to talk in public with her own people about these problems. And it was in this vicious circle that she was supposed to live, to govern, and to find a way out. ( 24 October 1995)

Although she was aware of actual scenario but due to deep rooted patriarchy, she was unable to take extreme steps to curb such problems. Bhutto defined empowerment as "the right to be independent; to be educated; to have choices in life" (109). This hiding and seeking process restricts the perceived identity of Bhutto because as a writer she is in a process of identity formation, clarifying and justifying her acts. Benazir Bhutto's autobiography clearly shows that the tone is not that of a rebel, rather it's of humble aristocratic woman working in consensus with popular culture. Patricia M. Spacks describes women autobiography in *Selves in Hiding the act of Autobiography* (1980) as "the dynamic process of recorded choice" (112), this signifies that identity of woman is in constant flux oscillating between the extremities of self and others. Spacks emphasized women's struggle to assert a positive identity and self-definition. In Spacks views women:

...use autobiography paradoxically as a mode of self-denial ...Evading an assertive self in public in favour of a passive... private self is a narrative strategy which reflects both a female dilemma and a female solution (132).

According to Spacks, women's autobiography does not seek self expression rather opts for self denial as their self expression is constrained due to multiple societal, cultural and religious obligations and commitments. Here in case of Benazir Bhutto's autobiography, her voice in her book tries to harmonize the cultural and religious practices with the modernity without provoking the patriarchal domineering. Bhutto also seems to be proving herself worthy of position, parentage, familial bonds and her societal obligations at the cost of own identity and aspirations. She herself admits in the preface of her



autobiography that “this is my story, events as I saw them, felt them, reacted to them. It is not an in-depth study of Pakistan, but a glance into the transformation of a society from democracy to dictatorship. Let it also be a call for freedom”(46). The production of such autobiographies serves as both transnational and nation building texts because such narratives (purposefully) describes historical transformations. Regardless of whether or not the narrator is self -reflexive of the narrating “I,” readers are drawn to autobiographies because the narrating “I” gives the impression that one is reading and interaction with real, living narrators from various walks of life. Marshall and Mayhead support this claim of reader/narration identification as:

...the telling of one’s life story exemplifies the human desire to connect with others, provide insight into one’s personal and public choices, give advice to those who may wish to follow in ones footsteps, contest others’ representations of self, and leave a legacy validating one’s existence. (7)

Marshall and Mayhead emphasize the rhetorical nature of autobiography in terms of its pedagogical function, it is worth noting that many readers can find advice and insight from which they can form a similar life journey or perspective. However, this type of pedagogical autobiographical writing that Marshall and Mayhead refer to is very much there in Bhutto’s autobiography because she inadvertently or deliberately crafts narratives in a way that gives understanding or insight into her life and her role in bringing about the desirous change in political system of the nation. Generally speaking, women’s autobiographies hold a particular pedagogical value through which they can shape the way in which future women may perceive themselves. As Marshall and Mayhead has further expressed:

...by rising to positions of power not readily or usually extended to females, the authors of these autobiographies serve as powerful symbols to inspire other women to enter the field of politics. Some of these women specifically use their work to encourage, instruct, and empower contemporary and future women leaders. (Marshall and Mayhead 186)

It clarifies the inspirational role of women in politics propagate their distinctiveness in politics and thus it not only empowers women but also prepares them for extreme sacrifices. According to Estelle Jelinek, “autobiographies of women in prominent political positions only became popular around the 1980s after generations of feminists paved the way for women’s political thinking to become legitimated as mainstream”(91). This legitimation of autobiography as a self reflexive genre might have inspired Benazir Bhutto for registering her share of political participation as a leader and as a woman. Thus her autobiography becomes a way of representing her public participation because it locates the narrator on both sides of the public/private divide. Through her autobiography, she seems to be pushing the boundaries and satisfying the status quo too. Furthermore, women’s political autobiographies become a site for the construction of the personal and civic self situated within local, national, and international political communities. Their modes of resistance work within the confines created by the patriarchal structure. This the way power relations establish hegemonies.

Power in this sense is an ability to do or create something potential. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Michel Foucault interrogated by saying “ if power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?”(142). Therefore, power is not in principle domination. It is the give and take people experience in everyday life as they come together to construct a better community and is associated with the emergence of resistance also. When women freed themselves from the constraints of domination to engage more actively and freely in the creation of community, then their resistance also becomes co-extensive. Although women hesitate to enter in politics because of the fear of violence yet Bhutto has

been successful in positioning herself in politics by resisting the hegemonic male perception about the politics and political affairs. She writes:

I feel a special personal obligation to contrast the true Islam -the religion of tolerance and pluralism-with the caricature of her faith that terrorists have hijacked...I am a female political leader fighting to bring modernity, communication, education and technology to Pakistan.(12)

Her life was difficult owing to various encumbrances and she had to struggle a lot to retain her position, in the male dominated society. There is a gradual evolution of identity in her political career when she reacted to various incidents. Foucault further defines power as “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization” (92). It infers that power is a complex set of relations which operates through agents to make institutions run. Those who lack power, consent to the hierarchies of society and the privileged groups use power to exploit them. Hence power is fundamentally relational as Foucault, in his essay “The Subject and Power” (2002) further says:

If we speak of the power of laws, institutions, and ideologies, if we speak of structures or mechanism of power, it is only so far as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others. The term power designates relationships between ‘partners’ (337).

It means that power is mobilized by laws, institutions and ideologies to designate relationships which are in turn circulated in the society as social discourses. Similarly, women in patriarchal set up do not lie outside the boundaries of power relations rather are integral part of network of power knowledge that makes up social discourse.

In patriarchal set-up, women cannot navigate politics without patriarchal support. Benazir Bhutto’s entry into the politics also exemplifies the patriarchal support behind her, as she belonged to an aristocratic Bhutto family. She was the powerful, intelligent, and charismatic leader throughout history and she managed to rise to the top of politics despite all the odds. As a woman, she came to power in a Third-World Islamic nation, during an era that was especially misogynistic and wrought with turmoil. “She was so unique, alluring and striking woman that she ascended to a position where even males are regularly deposed and discarded under the volatile and violent system of Pakistani politics”(Taub 3). Her outstanding attributes were the rare combination of her intellect, charisma and underpins that social forces are not the only that shape the way our world looks, personal charisma and destiny are also equally important. Being a woman, she was destined to face antagonism of the conservative elements and religious fundamentalists in the country but she emerged out as a social democrat. This reflected that she managed the vested interests of society and used her magnetism and luck for gaining political power.

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