



A Digital Ethnography of Gendered Memes and Symbolism in the India-Pakistan Conflict

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the gendered repression and symbolism used in the creation and dissemination of social media memes during times of elevated conflict between India and Pakistan, using the example of May 2025 escalation. The research employs a qualitative digital ethnographic approach to evaluate roughly 500 memes and associated content sampled from X (previously known as Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook during the height of the May 2025 escalation. Utilizing a post-colonial feminist lens, the researcher has identified four significant thematic patterns identified within the data set: (1) the hyper-masculinization of militaristic imagery, which constructs toughness as a national virtue; (2) the instrumentalization of women's bodies as markers of honour, pride, or victimhood; (3) the systematic emasculation of male enemies, utilized as a strategy of dehumanization; and (4) developing feminist and peace-centric counter-narratives that are counter to these dominant forms of representation and production of meaning. By exploring meme warfare in South Asia through a regionally specific geographical framework, this research advances theoretical and empirical understandings in Digital Media Studies, Conflict Studies, and Gender Studies. Furthermore, it illustrates the ways social media platforms

increasingly extend their influence on contemporary interstate conflicts through the reproduction and contestation of gendered power relations in ways that are both fluids, immediate, and widely circulated.

Keywords: War, Gender, Digital, Media, Memes, Narrative, and Digital Ethnography.

1. Introduction

The 21st century has been a time of radical change in the relations of conflict, as social media has become a frontline battlefield upon which narratives are being created, shared and fought over. The concept of digitalization has fundamentally changed the information landscape of the world because of the blurred lines between the information promoted by the state authorities and information created by the end user, thus redefining the modes by which the ideas of public opinion and national identities are formed during the emergence of the crisis (Madríd-Morales et al., 2024). This has been especially apparent in the field of digital competition between India and Pakistan in the context of social media, where information warfare, propaganda, and strategic messages have become a part of the social media competition (Hussain, 2021; Riaz, 2025). Although recent research on social media and information technology as a contributor to escalating contemporary conflict has gained more scholarly attention (Tyagi et al., 2020), the gendered aspect of weaponized ephemeral content: content that fades only to re-emerge in a politicized and repurposed form remains largely missing in the literature. Such a disjuncture is more vivid in the India-Pakistan case, an antagonism that has been rooted in historical animosity and nationalism. In recent years, the conflict has taken a volatile digital avatar, as the practice of digital nationalism and the practice of meme warfare has become major tools of narrative contestation (Irshad, 2025).

According to DeCook (2022), as he argues, memes act as a vehicle of the expression of either a personal or a collective voice, a kind of a form of grassroots propaganda that democratizes the processes of the creation of ideological discourse. However, the fact that these artifacts are brief and humorous masks the degree to which they recreate patriarchal logics, promote jingoism, and create normalized violence (Javed et al., 2022; Sen & Jha, 2024).

The intensification of the conflicts on May 7, 2025, provides a good example of how digital conflict entails the existence of cultural and gendered meanings.

The retaliatory strikes by India in the event known as Operation Sindoor, in response to the terrorist attack at Pahalgam in April, 2026 that had taken the lives of 26 civilian people, was not only a military operation but also a symbol with explicitly religious and gendered overtones: Sindoor, the powder of vermillion used by Hindu women to indicate marital status had clear symbolism attached to it. The next military action of Pakistan, Operation Bunyan al-Marsus, very soon gained digital subtexts as the Pakistani netizens trended the satirical term Operation Vidwa (widow) to make the campaign of India feminized and mocked. The struggle quickly went into the world of cyberspace as the hashtags like: “OperationSindoor”, “OperationVidwa” and “BunyanAlMarsus” became popular in South Asia. Memes and satirical materials were the means of nationalist hysteria, the means of derision, and the means of ideological warfare in this setting (Irshad, 2025; Tyagi et al., 2020). This paper makes the argument that memes in the India-Pakistan war are not the minor cultural artifacts but are effective carriers of nationalist and patriarchal ideas. They reinforce a symbolic division between militant masculinity and victimized femininity and authorize violence and support exclusionary gendered discourse (Javed et al., 2022; Sen & Jha, 2024). Meanwhile, though, the fluidity and subversive option of memes offer possibilities of emergent feminist counter-discourses to destabilize these hegemonic constructs (DeCook, 2022).

This paper starts with review literature on digital conflict, meme warfare, and gender representations of war, and then theorizes from a postcolonial feminist perspective. It goes on to present the digital ethnographic approach used. The findings are then described and discussed in the following sections, with their overall implications considered thereafter. The paper ends with an overview of its contributions and suggestions for future research.

2. Research Questions

- How are gendered narratives being made and disseminated via memes and visual symbolic content on social media in India-Pakistan conflicts?
- How gendered memes add to the spectacle of narrative warfare and nation-building?

- Are there emerging counter-narratives that counter these prevailing gendered tropes?

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Narrative Warfare in Digital Age

Digital-era narrative warfare involves de-spatialization of the producer-consumer of information, or at minimum a de-spatialization of boundaries, leading to a more anarchic, more disputed informational landscape (Eggel, 2024). Online platforms are also created to endorse sensationalize the stories and may magnify hostilities. This overstatement of simplistic geopolitics into the binary oppositions of us/them is introduced in the report of the Institute of Integrated Transitions (IFIT) report as a source of conflict (IFIT, 2021). This lies in the very center of what scholars refer to today as digital truth-making whereby the online communities are using virality and multimedia to generate certain political truths (Bareither, 2023).

In this respect, memes have already been transformed into internet jokes and into political communication tools. Their strength must be valued in both soft power (the possibility to influence preferences by attracting them), as well as sharp power (manipulation and disinformation). Memes, as defined by the Lowy Institute, have the potential to become potent tools of information disorder by spreading radical ideologies, in the guise of real humor. This meme tool plays the same power games in such a place as India Pakistan where memes are used to carry out narrative shifting (on the one hand, in a very primitive manner, both the reflection and symptom of deeper narratives). One side resort to the dark sardonic humor to attack the other side jingoism, which adds up to an augmentation of self-referencing, and re-narrativizing the world through a satirical approach.

3.2 Gendered Representations of War

It has always been argued by feminist international relations (IR) scholars that without gender perspective, war is still a veil of silence (Oyeleye & Jiang, 2023; Enloe, 2014). So far, the narratives of conflict are split into gender binaries: the voices of men are usually preoccupied with the military tactics,

and those of women emphasize the trauma of civilians and victimization (Sjoberg & Via, 2010). This binary is in constant use by nationalist groups. Men are conditioned with the shame and emasculation discourses and urged to be literal fighters of their people. On the other hand, femininity is used symbolically. Women are portrayed as the national representation of innocence and respectability, who are objects who should be kept away of an outside, male other. This is yet another supporting element of a patriarchal narrative that strong men should be ready to employ violence to protect weak women, which is one of the main themes of nationalist constructions (GIFCT, 2025). They thrive better in such an environment in the South Asian soil where patriarchal concepts are deeply rooted (Banerjee, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

3.3 An Intersectional Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

The article focuses on these conflicting tensions using a postcolonial intersectional feminist lens. This lens is required to transcend Western feminist ideology that is inadequate to represent the overlaps of gender, nationhood, religion, and colonial histories in the global South (Strazzeri, 2024). It is opposed to the biased orientalist interpretation of South Asian women as passive victims the save the Muslim woman syndrome, which Abu-Lughod (2013) has eloquently criticized. Instead, this framework brings out agency, multiple identities, and resistance within South Asian women. Counter-narratives are then retheorized in terms of the digital feminist activism or cyberfeminism, in which women users take advantage of the same digital platforms that disseminate oppressive narratives to create space of resistance and peace-based discourse (Mohanty, 2003).

4. Method

4.1 Research Design

The main methodological approach of this study is digital ethnography. Being a qualitative form of inquiry, it is especially suitable to investigate cultures, communities, and meaning-making systems that have arisen in digitally mediated communication (Borkovich, 2022). Unlike quantitative methods,

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which tend to give precedence to surface level cues (e.g., how many times hashtags are used or how many posts there are), digital ethnography allows one to question processes that inform the meaning of digital practices. It enables a discussion not only of that which is said and shared, but of how and why certain communicative acts are to be integrated into larger socio-political and cultural frames. In more specific terms, a form of what Kozinets (2015) has called 'netnography', a modification of ethnographic research methods to online social worlds analysis, is used in this work.

Netnography is concerned with systematizing the observation and explanation of the digital interactions with a view to revealing the symbolic, affective, and ideological aspects of digital social life. Netnography, in the current study, offers a construct to trace the production, distribution and refutation of gendered conflict narratives through digital channels and give insight into discursive processes by which memes and other short-lived content serve as a carrier of nationalist and patriarchal propaganda.

4.2 Data Collection

Three main platforms were used for data collection: X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook. These platforms were chosen given the engagement of users in both India and Pakistan, the visual focus of users' content, and the platforms' record of hosting nationalist conversation. A purposive sampling strategy was employed for the source selection to include dominant voices in the Indian and Pakistani cyber-space during conflict time April 25th when the cross broader tension started after Pahalgam attack in India till the date of ceasefire announced on May 10th, 2025. Overall, 500 different memes consisting of (#IndiaStrikesBack, #PakistanZindabad, # OperationSindoor, #SayNoToWar) and their corresponding posts, captions and a random selection of the users' comments.

4.3 Ethical considerations

The current research was carried out with full ethical considerations. All information was taken from publicly available profiles. All usernames and personal details were anonymized. Peer review was used to reduce researcher's

positionality and potential biases. In conclusion, there was a deliberate attempt to see to it that there was no unnecessary gratuitous replication of harmful imagery, and all examples used had a very specific and obvious analytical function of critical deconstruction. Due to the sensitivity of the content posted on social media about security forces of both sides, the photos of memes are not given in analysis part.

4.4 Selection Criteria

4.4.1 Inclusion Criteria

- Any content that originated from Indian/Pakistani digital spaces and is publicly available (face book, Instagram, X) in the context of conflict between Pakistan and India in 2025 between 25th April to 10th May 2025
- The content or memes specifically references the conflict in 2025, military operations, nationalistic sentiment, or opposition of another country,
- Any content available publicly on social media and has gendered images
- Any image contains visual or meme content in the form of: Images, Image/Text Composites, Short Visual Posts related to conflict-related hashtags e.g., #IndiaStrikesBack, #PakistanZindabad, #OperationSindoor and #SayNoToWar -

4.4.2 Exclusion Criteria

- Private or restricted content
- The content does not relate to the specified conflict or does not include gendered or symbolic elements
- Duplicate reposts (i.e., reposting content without original comment or context).

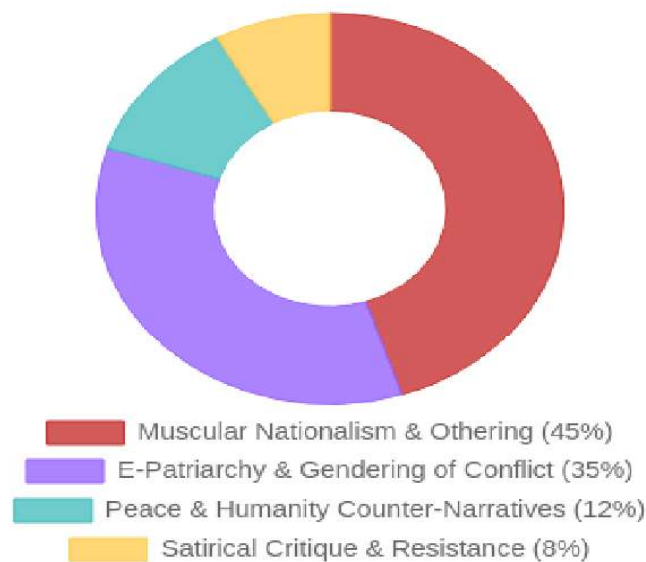
5. Findings & Discussion

The data was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis in six stages, as described by Braun & Clarke (2019). In accordance with classic grounded

theory, analysis was conducted in three passes: Open Coding (in which recurrent visual and textual themes were noted); Axial Coding (where codes were grouped into conceptual categories such as "Heroic Masculinity"); and Thematic Analysis (where dominant themes were synthesized). To give a quantitative overview of these qualitative findings, the distribution of the main themes among the entire corpus (N=500) was determined and is shown in the graph below:

Figure 5.1

Thematic Distribution of Gendered Memes in the India-Pakistan Conflict Sample (N=500). Data synthesized from thematic analysis, showing the dominance of patriarchal and nationalist tropes.



Thematic analysis identified four overarching interconnected themes that explicate the build-up of, and contestation between, gendered narratives in the India-Pakistan digital conflict space. These are consistent with the pattern from a quantitative perspective, whereby 80% of the texts analysed consisted of themes muscular nationalism and e-patriarchy.

5.1 Theme 1: The Hyper-Militarization of Masculinity

This theme explains a hyper-militarized and barbaric form of masculinity being glorified as a demonstration of national virility in some social media narrative. Memes were always embodied by soldiers and politicians as corporeal and militant in their essence. It was not only patriotism, but a demonstration of masculine pride. Sexual memes and posts that objectified and promoted Pakistan military officer as the representative of a Pakistani masculine power and nation began to circulate in the social media after the man addressed a press conference. This worship makes a warrior a national hero, or a romanticized masculinity, and an indication that one must equate military strength with power, protection, sexual strength and beauty.



5.2 Theme 2: The Nation as a Feminine Body

The rhetorical framing of the nation as a female body has been a major theme in nationalist imaginaries. The bodies of women are often used as metaphor of purity, honour and vulnerability, and the body of men is represented as defender of such honour or as forced violator of such honour (Yuval-Davis, 1997; McClintock, 1993). This has been most evident in South Asia where women have become the figurative arena through which national struggles are waged (Banerjee, 2005; Chenoy, 2004). This phenomenon is crudely depicted by the Operation Sindoor memes: Indian nationalist narratives used Sindoor, the pigment that indicates the status of married Hindu women as a symbol of military victory and reduced female marital chastity to the Indian national honour. Claiming that military victory can be equated with marking women bodies, these memes reproduce a patriarchal-nationalist logic that finds sovereignty in the chastity of women (Enloe, 2014). Even more liberal symbols are also used to nationalist ends. Viral comparisons of uniformed Indian female officers to burqa-clad Pakistani women positioned the visibility of women as a civilizational scorecard and used the rhetoric of feminism to propagate a narrative of cultural superiority. It has been observed by scholars how feminist ideals can be used selectively, appropriated into militarized discourses, to create what has since been called femo-nationalism the selective application of women rights to nationalist or exclusionary politics (Farris, 2017).



5.3 Theme 3: The Emasculation and Dehumanization of the “Other”

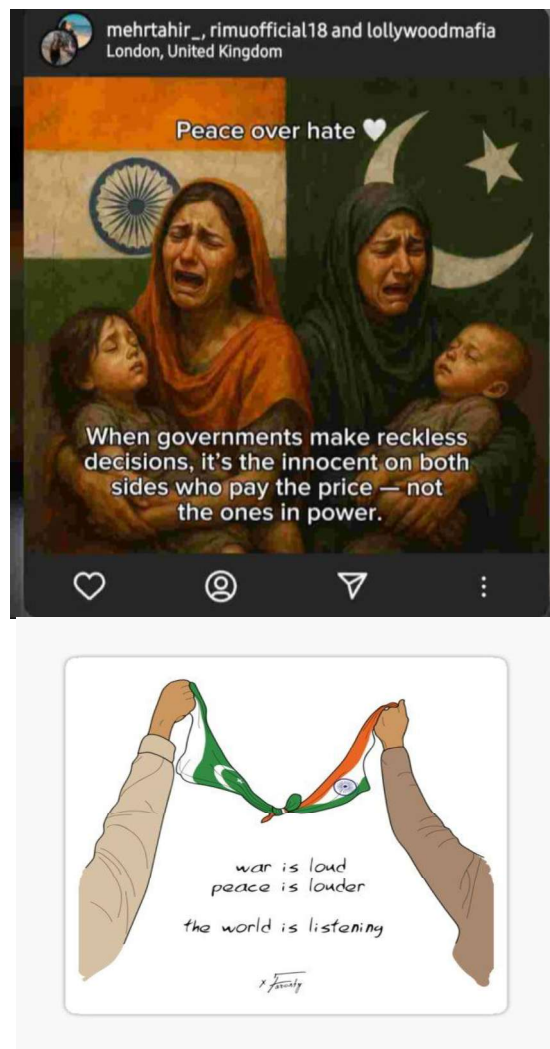
One of the parallel strategies is the emasculation of the enemy in ritual that undermines his masculinity by making him weak, feminized, or sexually deviant. This is quite consistent with the theory of hegemonic masculinity developed by Connell whereby dominance is not just secured through the exaltation of some masculinities but also through the subordination of others (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Memes of enemy men in bangles or saris perform a symbolic double insult, taking the mickey both at gender and at cultural identity. This kind of emasculating humour is connected to the longer traditions of colonial representations of colonized men as effeminate or inferior (Sinha, 1995). This type of humour is also intertwined with sexualized violence: the threats of kidnapping actresses as *maal-e-ghanimat* (spoils of war) are based on misogynistic tropes of women as property, and are echoed in both medieval images of conquest and in extremist propaganda (Ging, 2019; Mantilla, 2013). These memes reduce the enemy to a feminized and violated body and, in turn, deny adversaries their dignity and present gendered violence as a natural warfare practice.





5.4 Theme 4: Counter-Narratives and Digital Feminist Resistance

Nevertheless, alongside the dominance of memes related to patriarchy there are also counter-narratives. Hashtags such as “PeaceOverHate” or the disapproval of taking conflict as a commodity in Bollywood represent attempts at re-taking the discursive space. Such interventions are familiar to the traditions of digital feminist activism, where other voices of the marginalized disrupt the overarching discourse through irony, satire, and rejection (Mendes et al., 2019). As an example, the satirical posts of Pakistani users that twist nationalist swagger against themselves serve as evidence of humor as an element of coping and resistance to politics. According to the postcolonial feminist approach, such counter-narratives challenge orientalism approaches to the South Asian women who are portrayed as the victimized (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mohanty, 2003). Rather, they preempt the agency of women that defy both patriarchal-nationalistic scripts and global scripts that negate subaltern subjectivities. Although small in scope, these interventions indicate the possibility that digital platforms could be used as confronted spaces where the oppressive logic can be rewritten.



6. Discussion

The results imply a consistent and self-reinforcing gendered conflict narrative system. The hyper-masculine protector, the feminized nation, and the emasculated other are structured in a triadic manner to demonstrate what Yuval-Davis (1997) refers to as the gendered logic of national reproduction, in which the symbolic attributes of women lay out the frontiers of nationality. This trend is supported by long-established patriarchal ideology, according to which masculinity was formed as a warrior, defender, and aggressor, and

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femininity as the territory that had to be preserved (Enloe, 2014). The creation of such discursive formations is not particular to South Asia.

They are like how extremist groups across the world use gendered discourse to justify violence, which presents men as warriors and women as rewards and honors (GIFCT, 2025; Sjoberg & Via, 2010). Additional nuances are provided by a postcolonial feminist lens, which discloses how digital discourses reproduce colonial narrative patterns like the British theory of martial races, which fundamentalized some South Asian communities as naturally violent or hyper-masculine (Banerjee, 2005; Sjoberg & Via, 2010). Such historical constructs are re-coded in digital memes, which disseminate reductive types of strength and weakness, usually on national and religious grounds.

The decolonial theory also highlights how online spaces reinforce gender norms by pushing the militarized masculinity to be the ultimate signifier of the national sovereignty. Such idealized militarism replicates hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and builds legitimacy by developing aggressive, exclusionary masculinity. Such myths persist, and therefore, guarantee that social media is not simply a mirror of conflict, but a re-creation of colonial epistemologies of gender and violence. In this regard women are marginalized twice. They are re-enrolled into colonial histories of violence, as markers of honor the violation of which warrants revenge, and the reality of their voices and conflict experiences is neglected or marginalized (Sjoberg & Via, 2010; Strazzeri, 2024). Memes tend to do little to indicate misogynous actions as normal or trivial, thus upholding what Massanari (2017) describes as toxic techno-cultures, digital spaces that introduce structural misogyny into the daily conversation of the Internet. This is consistent with the research by DeCook (2018) regarding memes as symbolic violence where humor masks aggression and de-sensitizes people.

In fact, according to Jane (2016) and Ging (2019), internet misogyny is not marginal, but central to online cultures: it seeks to legitimize the hostility against women and the maintenance of exclusionary masculinities. Burnham et al. (2022) proves that even the most ordinary memes can be used to

disseminate hateful ideologies by having small influences on the opinions of the masses. The threat is, then, a process of desensitization, whereby what is repeatedly exposed to in the form of violent humor is a decrease in the empathetic effect on individuals, a falling of the standard on policy-based aggressiveness, a normalization of the institution of misogyny. The real-world implications are enormous. The gender discourses in South Asia are militarized as mentioned by Chenoy (2004) and it is expressed as restrictions on the South Asian woman in her right to safety and autonomy. Memes are dangerous to condone more general tendencies of gender violence by culturally normalizing sexual violence or by ridiculing women as spoils of war. In these forms, not only are digital cultures reflected, but also add to gendered insecurities. At the same time, based on the emergent counter-stories discovered throughout this paper, one can see what feminist digital resistance can be. Hashtags like PeaceOverHate or satirical remarks about nationalism excesses disorient the pompous discourses of militarized masculinity.

These echo the ideas of digital feminist activism introduced by Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019), according to which women and allies open discursive space of resistance. However, as researchers observe, those interventions have structural disadvantages in algorithmic-based settings that favor outrage and sensationalism (Mendes et al., 2019; Massanari, 2017). Feminist peacebuilding, therefore, faces the challenge to devise strategies that can make these counter-narratives more visible in the context of hostile platform architectures.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has shown how the India-Pakistan conflict when filtered through the digital world is deeply gendered in its articulation and impacts. Memes do not appear as amusing or short-lived objects but as powerful discursive instruments that recalcitrate patriarchal-nationalist ideologies, justifying violence by reproducing binary oppositions between militant manhood and frail femininity. Simultaneously, the existence of counter-narratives, however, weak, implies that the digital realm has a subversive potential of disrupting the hegemonic structures. Through a digital ethnographic/netnographic methodology, the analysis has enriched an intersectional grasp of the nexus

between gender, technology, and conflict by providing a uniquely postcolonial perspective in which digital nationalism is framed within the larger geopolitics of South Asia.

Considering these results, one of the most important suggestions is the incorporation of digital literacy and feminist peace education in civic and academic settings. The ability to recognize, decode and resist gendered manipulations in online discourse can reduce the ease with which the discourse of patriarchal-nationalist beliefs spread freely. In addition, encouraging scholar-activist-policymaker partnerships to research and augment feminist counter-narratives, in both publicly visible and encrypted spaces, would enhance the ability of digital publics to counter hostility instead of reproducing it. These interventions would not only enhance the scholarly inquiry, but would also be critical civic strategies at the time when the battlefield of conflict is becoming more virtual.

8. Declarations

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