

## **DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE AND WOMEN: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF READER'S ONLINE COMMENTS ON THE COLUMN "THE OTHER HALF" PUBLISHED IN 'THE HINDU'**

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### **Abstract**

Mainstream media content on socially crucial issues generates more discussions and debates in online platforms. The online news sites encourage reader's participation by means of enabling them to like, share, comment on the content. This paves way for the readers' engagement with the content as well as other readers. The chain of comments continues to grow sometimes to more than hundreds or thousands of comments. This phenomenon initiates a public discussion on the online news platforms. It is interesting and vital to know the public opinion on socially crucial content based on their online participation. This paper analyses the online comments of readers on the content exclusively written on women issues, the column in the daily, The Hindu by Kalpana Sharma. Using Critical Discourse Analysis as the theoretical and methodological background this paper analyses the user generated content.

**Keywords:** CDA, Readers' Comments, Online news Portals, The Hindu, The Other Half, Kalpana Sharma

### **Introduction**

Research shows that the allotment of space by mainstream media for women's issues is limited to recipes, beauty tips, decorations, health, etc. Especially, a mainstream daily allotting a space on a regular basis is been rare. Continuous deliberations that deconstruct the existing patriarchal norms of the society were not common in news dailies until the past decade. This paper has taken one such column, titled 'The Other Half,' that appeared in the online news site of The Hindu in the Sunday Magazine section for a couple of years. Also, online news sites provide readers an opportunity to comment on the content as soon as they access it. From a research point of view, it is also convenient to access the online comments of readers to understand the public deliberations in the digital public sphere. A Critical Discourse Analysis of the readers' comments is employed to understand what the readers on online news platforms deliberate on socially significant issues like gender. As stated by Janks (2006), Critical discourse analysis (CDA) stems from a critical theory of language that sees language as a form of social practice. All social practices are tied to specific historical contexts and are how existing social relations are reproduced or contested serving different interests.

### **Background of the study**

The hierarchical patriarchal systems and structures are deep rooted in families, politics, media, education, and religion. This power provides benefits to one section, the male members, the male privilege in terms of education, opportunities and property. Women were

denied basic rights to education, employment, property – until laws enforced equality. In the above scenario, the woman's status is still in a suppressed state where access to basic rights to education, healthcare, security, freedom, and so on is still a distant dream. Traditional and cultural forms of discrimination against women, which continue even in the postmodern era, include early marriages, unequal priority for girl child education compared to male children, sex-selective abortions, female feticides, wife battering, physical and verbal abuse for being born a girl, traditional discriminatory practices like tattooing on a widow's forehead, increasing suicides of mothers with their children due to family level violence and discrimination, forceful confinement to conventional roles of home keeping and child-rearing, sexual harassments, denial of say in marriages, and so on. The continuing forms of gender-based discrimination suffered by women are not even considered to be an issue of importance. It is part and parcel of the so-called everyday life of women in the cultural and traditional setup across the country. Gender-based discrimination has been normalized as a standard and cultural practice. Women were on the receiving end of such forms of structured inequalities, and men were in a privileged position compared to women with access to education and not in the bonds of systems like sati or denial of marriages for a widower. Realizing women's status and questioning the inequalities paved the way for the struggle for women's rights on par with men. However, in India, men leaders were the people who advocated for women rights and freedom as in the case of Raja Ram Mohan Roy.

### **Understanding Feminism in the Indian Context**

Feminism is the realization of the subordinate position of women and the related social injustice and inequalities faced by women in the socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts. Feminism demands eliminating the disparities and social inequities toward a gender-equal society. As Byerly & Ross (2006) state, the words feminist and feminism refer to women's liberation movements since the 1970s that have been aimed at securing women's right to participate in their societies, including the ability to enter into public deliberation, institution-building, and other processes associated with citizenship. Feminism in India is still seen as a Western influence and something alien and dangerous to the country's culture. It was not received in its real sense in the Indian context and was never treated for what it was among the world masses. Chaudhuri (2004: xv–xvi) observes, for instance, that feminism in India has to be "located within the broader framework of an unequal international world." Still, she also asks whether hesitation to use the term might exclude women "from the feminist heritage" (as cited in Byerly & Ross 2006). Women have been at the receiving end of unequal treatment and were the sufferers of discrimination by being confined to home, denied education, and enforcing child rearing as the primary task. The men folk, in turn, were burdened with the entire economic sustainability of the family in terms of survival. So division of labor or roles were not gender equal or neutral. Many argue that suppressing women was not a planned process but an emergence resulting from a particular way of social life. Still, when social practices emerge violating the fundamental rights of women, then it is a serious concern.

As John (2014) puts it, Indian feminism has three episteme or grids of intelligibility in the history of “women” and “feminism” in India. The struggle for education, widow remarriage, and dowry prohibition was the first wave of feminism in the Indian context. She puts that the first campaigns, public debates, and fierce controversies on women and their status, initiated by men (Indian, British, missionary, and so on), stretched across the 19th century in different forms at different levels. Even if there had been radical women thinkers, there needed to be a platform for them to come out with their ideas due to obstacles like lack of education and empowerment within the patriarchal social setup. However, it was not the same with men folk of the nation; who had the freedom to deliberate radical ideas even beyond traditional solid contradictions. So, in the Indian context, the extreme voices and writings on feminism were heard and read first by men. Women taking a role in public or social life was socially accepted in a larger context only in the nation's freedom struggle. John (2014) calls the second episteme the national episteme, which came to be constructed by a founding generation of nationalists from the 1940s into the 1960s. The third wave is the post-national and after the 1990s to the present.

### **Gendered Space in Mainstream Media**

Amidst the above social context, a voice for women in the mainstream media, more sensitive or radical, was not allowed much. Only women writers who played a safe role, constructing women-related narratives within the socially prescribed norms, were allowed to have a space in the mainstream media. The other women who wanted to bring a change were voicing their concerns on the so-called 'alternative media platforms. Slowly the trend is changing, and beyond the 21st century, there are spaces for women who care about women's rights in the mainstream mass media. This is a real struggle, and today we find many women writers writing on women's rights and social responsibility. One such writer is Kalpana Sharma, a journalist who writes columns in the mainstream dailies on women and marginalized people of the society.

### **Kalpana Sharma – Voice of Voiceless**

Kalpana Sharma is mainly known for her critical voice for the voiceless who has never feared pointing out the odds, even during her tenure in the Himmat during emergencies. Being a senior journalist, she has stood for the values she believes in and articulated in her blog 'ulti khopdi.' This blog is written by Kalpana Sharma, who writes about cities, the environment, developmental issues, the media, women, and many other subjects. The title 'ulti khopdi' is a Hindi phrase referring to someone who likes to look at things from the other side. Kalpana Sharma has been a journalist since 1972 and has worked with Himmat, The Indian Express, The Times of India, and The Hindu. She has specialized in writing on environmental and developmental issues, with a particular focus on the concerns of women. With Ammu Joseph, she has written and edited *Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues*. For her column, 'The Other Half', which first appeared in The Indian Express (and then in The Hindu, where she is a Deputy Editor), Kalpana Sharma was awarded the Chameli Devi Jain Award for an Outstanding Woman Journalist in 1987. She is the author of *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum* (Penguin India) and has edited *Missing: Half the Story, Journalism as if Gender Matters* (Zubaan Books). Also served as a columnist in The Sunday Magazine

supplement of The Hindu, The Hoot ([www.thehoot.org](http://www.thehoot.org)), and an editorial consultant with the Economic and Political Weekly. She currently writes a fortnightly column, Broken News, in NewsLaundry.com and is also a freelancer continuing to write on people-centric issues of social concern.

### **Digital Public Sphere**

New communication technology expands the means by which persuasive messages are disseminated to receivers (Walther, David, Kim, & Antony, 2010). Online news sites allow readers to spontaneously register their opinions in the comment's column, thus enabling them to play an active role. The comments can be in the form of opinions, suggestions, appreciation, or sometimes totally against the context of the text. As per a survey by Princeton Survey Research International among more than 2,000 adults in the year 2010, it was estimated that one-fourth of U.S. Internet users had already participated in comment features on news articles or blogs; it further stated that 72 percent of news consumers reported that they "follow the news because they enjoy talking to others about what is happening in the world" (Purcell et al., 2010, p. 4).

### **Statement of the problem**

In the above context, this study concentrates on the online public discourse on the columns that regularly appeared on women's issues covering many issues of social importance. The column in The Hindu online news site has been titled "The Other Half" and written by the journalist Kalpana Sharma based in Mumbai. Before this specific column, she had been writing in the said paper as a columnist. Later she regularly contributed to the column on women titled 'The Other Half'. This has been seen as a space to articulate on women related issues, from health, education, violence, rights, problems, and day to day

### **Objectives of the study:**

The study aims to determine the nature of issues covered in the columns on women. The central part of the study is to critically analyse the trends of online public discourse among the readers of the columns on women. Their response to the article includes comments, likes, and shares via social media platforms. Also, to evaluate the nature of the words, by whom, and to understand if they reflect society's understanding of gender. The comments of the readers available on the online news site of the column are taken for analysis using Critical Discourse Analysis.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on a news site can illuminate the nature of discourse on the issue taken for analysis. CDA focuses primarily on social problems and political issues rather than current paradigms and fashions (Dijk, 2001). Dijk (1998) states that developments in the new discipline of discourse analysis allow us to study media text and talk more explicitly, systematically, and interestingly. He further states that such an analysis considers media discourse and news as a particular form of social and institutional practice in

a broader socio-economic and cultural framework. The primary function of CDA, as introduced by Batstone (1995:198), is to "seek to reveal how texts are constructed so that particular (and potentially indoctrinating) perspectives can be expressed delicately and covertly" (as cited in Mahfouz, 2013). Critical discourse analysis deals with the long-term analysis of fundamental causes and consequences of issues. Therefore, it requires an account of complex relationships between text, talk, society, and culture (Mogashoa, 2014). Figueiredo (1998b) studies the legal discourse from the perspective of CDA identifying the effects the linguistic practices of the criminal justice system have on the social positions of judges, defendants, and complainants and how they relate with the world and with each other. The study identifies a circular relationship between discourse and subjective, i.e., individual speakers/writers produce texts and talks. However, as social agents, they are created by discourse through their experiences of texts and talks.

### **CDA in this analysis**

Lu & Catalano (2015), in their study, do a critical discourse analysis of reader comments in online news reports about Dual Language Education (DLE) to learn more about the current state of public opinion regarding media discourse about these programs and the type of discourse that might be most effective in promoting DLE for all students, but particularly those who need it most—i.e., minority language learners. According to Fairclough, each of the dimensions of CDA requires different kinds of analysis: 1. Text analysis (description); 2: processing analysis (interpretation), and 3. Social analysis is an explanation (Janks, 2006). In this current study, CDA is used to critically examine the production of the comments in terms of the gender of the reader. It also analyzes the content of the comments to find out if they are accepted, argued, or rejected by the readers based on gender.

Further, the study also tries to see if the existing social attitudes relating to women are reflected in the readers' comments. Owing to a large amount of data, the researcher chose to take the columns of a particular year, 2015, since it has continuity. The articles were published in the online news site of the daily The Hindu. All the writer's columns in this online news site of the selected year were taken for the study. Thus, this study takes the columns written by the author in the year 2015 from the available online sources, which are 22 columns in number. Out of the 22 columns, the CDA was applied to the comments of the readers on the issues for each of the columns.

**Nature of issues covered in the columns on women:** The study finds that 31.82% of the cases are on issues relating to violence against women, such as sexual harassment at the workplace, rape, cybercrimes, moral policing, child sexual abuse, violence on dalit and tribal journalists and gender-based violence. Following this is the columns on social and political systems and the problems arising out of them, namely, politician's comments on women-related issues, how the police and the criminal justice administration deal with victims of rape, and social response to the documentary named "India's daughter" – the one on the gang rape and murder of the Delhi physiotherapy women student in 2012. Apart from the above issues relating to women's development and gender discrimination, gender roles and issues relating to war and migration have been covered during the study period.

## 1. Text Analysis

**Gendered constructions of comments:** The study shows that only 58.70% of the men's comments support ideas in the columns on gender, whereas when it is women, the percentage is 70. Similarly, 20% of the comments by men and 37.5% of comments by women are found to be against the idea of the writer. 22.5% of the comments place arguments to the writer pointing out the additions or suggestions towards the columns. This is in agreement with the study that states that the openness of these participatory technologies has the potential to complicate or subvert the intended effects of central messages by juxtaposing contradictory sentiments of other users alongside the central messages that a persuasive source intends to convey (Walther, David, Kim, & Antony, 2010). McGregor (2003:2) argues that given the power of the written and spoken word, critical discourse analysis is necessary for describing, interpreting, analyzing, and critiquing social life reflected in the text (as cited in Mogashoa, 2014). Power, dominance, and inequality between social groups typically belong to a macro level of analysis (Van Dijk, 2001). In the text of the comments, one can observe that for one of the columns on the work of women, the comment is as follows by one of the readers

"What nonsense headline n story...even men work hard... Women"

This takes the content in a wrong sense where it does not say that men do not work but tries to explain the hard work of women from a gender perspective. Similarly, some comments by women on the column on gender spaces support the writer like,

"Yes, parents should educate boys. They should be told to respect and behave with girls/women. They should have knowledge of what will happen to them if they misbehave."

For the same column, some of the men comment like

"This article seems to be a case of writing for the sake of writing. The author has not revealed a secret. It is well known that in over 70% of rape cases, the accused are found to be known to the victim."

For the same column, some suggestions are also provided,

The author forgot to mention the reality of hardcore porn readily available to people in this country, major or minor, through Smartphones, which is driving them into committing these crimes

The above sample analysis of the text shows that the biases or prejudices of gender in both men and women are reflected as per their gender orientation in the social setup. The texts reproduce the social norms irrespective of their good or bad.

## 2. Process Analysis

**Access to discourse and power:** when it comes to commenting trends on the online content by the author as specified in the above context. The access to discourse and, in turn, exhibit



power on issues where public opinion is formed has been the men at the forefront. As for the use of online technologies, several studies have pointed out that women's access and public deliberation are comparatively low when compared to men. Thus the gender of the persons who had commented on the online columns was assessed based on the names; still, those names that were not clear in the assignment of gender were considered comments from anonymous people. It is found that there exists a digital divide in terms of gender where 70.77% of people who have commented on the columns are male, whereas 15.38% are women, and 13.85% are anonymous or names with gender confusion. This shows that women are still far beyond in terms of online deliberation on critical social issues.

### 3. Social analysis

**Trends of online public discourse on gender:** The sharing of columns on gender-related issues shows the public discourse on gender. It shows how the public perceives the issues of gender to be necessary. Out of the 22 columns, there were 3219 shares via social media platforms, with an average of 146 shares per column. Also, the columns that have been shared more than 50 times are 54.55%, and those shared more than 100 times are 31.82%.

**Reflecting on social reality:** The study finds that there had been 65 comments from the readers on the columns. This is an average of 3 comments per column. This shows the level of importance online readers give in terms of commenting on issues relating to gender. The study finds that more than women readers, men have participated more in commenting on the columns on gender issues.

### Conclusion

The differences of opinions or attitudes based on gender come from the basic social system, the family, and are carried on to society, and it is reflected in the online discourse of the readers of online news sites. Thus, online media need to include deliberations on socially significant issues like gender and provide space to record, argue, appreciate, negotiate, and discuss such crucial issues for the betterment of society. Even if the readers reflect the social context in their comments, it is also a space for activists, educationists, and women's rights people to register and educate the public in their way in these common discourse platforms. The digital public sphere is a democratic space for public deliberations on socially vital issues. This has to be utilized its maximum for the common good of the society and its wellbeing.

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