

Superimposition of Metanarrative through Counter Narrative in Political Tweets of Maryam Nawaz

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating superimposition of metanarrative by counter narratives in the political tweets of Maryam Nawaz. The data was confined to the tweets of Maryam Nawaz over the period of two months (February and March 2018). The thematic framework of Riessman et.al (2008) was used as a theoretical lens to interpret the data. The study reveals that Maryam Nawaz is inclined to develop counter narratives in her communication through Tweets. These narratives eclipse the often claimed, propagated and manipulated metanarrative (declared in the party *Manifesto*) in the pursuit of her personal interests. The study shows that the counter narratives are perpetuated against rival parties, institutions and sometimes against the party *Manifesto* to generate conflict and to instigate the followers for protests. The study also reveals that metanarrative of the party was not communicated by Maryam Nawaz even during significant political events. Not speaking of the party manifesto/metanarrative, she has been using the virtual space interaction to counter attack her rival political parties. This study provides a direction to future studies to investigate the role of social media in helping Pakistani politicians for getting their voice out to a larger community mostly a direct appeal to their voters for information, persuasion and mobilization.

Key Words: *Twitter, counter narrative, metanarrative, Maryam Nawaz, PML(N), politics of social media.*

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Introduction

There is an increasing use of social media for disseminating beliefs and propagating personal perspective as has been noted by Rafi (2017) that social media is used commonly to create awareness, co-ordinate people's beliefs and bring them together. Given the social networking sites, twitter plays a significant role in developing interaction between politicians and the public specially youth in Pakistan. Pakistani politicians such as Maryam Nawaz, Imran Khan, Asad Umar, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, and Shah Mehmood Qureshi etc., have their active Twitter accounts to interact with followers regularly. It is observed that they use certain communicative and discursive strategies to influence their followers.

The followers are usually enticed by the slogans raised by their leaders e.g., *tabdeeli aagayi hai* (change has taken place) by PTI, *vote ko izzat do* (respect the ballot) by PML (N), *roti, kapda, aur makaan* (bread, cloth and shelter) by PPP and so on. The political slogans and rhetoric influence the followers in many ways (Shafiq et al., 2017). The political leaders are fond of creating the charm of words and promises to attract voters both through the main stream media like television by broadcasting of paid content on (Guleria et al., 2016) regarding their social welfare projects (see e.g., Salcido, 1984). However, there is an increasing trend among politicians to prefer twitter over mainstream media to be in contact with their supporters (Keane, 2009; Posetti, 2010; Westling, 2007; Evans, Cordova & Sipole, 2014) as has been noted by Ali, et al., (2013). The Internet-based

form of political participation has consolidated in recent years with social media providing public space for free expression and opinion formation and as a resource for mobilizing people for collective action. Social media sites play a significant role in helping political actors getting their voice out to a larger community mostly a direct appeal to their voters for information, persuasion and mobilization (see e.g., Eijaz, 2013; Vaccari et al., 2013; Chadwick, 2013; Johannessen, 2014; Fraia & Missaglia, 2014; Ahmad & Popa, 2014; Dez'elan, Vobic' & Maksuti, 2014; Borah, 2014; Shen, 2016; Michailidou, 2017; Kovic et al., 2017; Spaiser et al., 2017).

Twitter is considered the most popular social media site for generating political dialogues, to construct certain ideologies and to determine the audience to accept discursive practices of politicians as it has been noted by Dez'elan, Vobic' and Maksuti (2014), Fraia and Missaglia (2014) and those cited therein. Among the politicians who use twitter, Maryam Nawaz takes the lead with 54000+ tweets since 2012 with an average of 27+ tweets per day. This overwhelming use of social media has drawn our attention to investigate the construction and reconstruction of personalities, identities and cult of political personalities.

Not surprisingly, a political party documents its Metanarrative in the form of Manifesto which is verbally reiterated on various occasions through speeches, press conferences, dialogues and through the party's website of media. The homepage of Pakistan Muslim League (N) showcases health

and education, accountability, implementation of constitution, employment, promotion of agriculture, elimination of terrorism, availability of electricity, justice, international collaboration, democracy and prosperity its manifesto. The president of the party raised the slogan as “Hamari Manzil - Khuddar, khushhhaal, khudmukhtar Pakistan.” [*Our destination: Self-reliant, prosperous, independent Pakistan*] (Manifesto, 2013). The slogan/metanarrative highlights that: Pakistan will progress in all the fields of life under the reign of PML (N).

The study assumes that the narratives perpetuated by politicians on twitter are away from the party manifesto. In the same vein, the narratives constructed by Maryam Nawaz (henceforth Maryam) who is daughter of Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif (henceforth Nawaz Sharif), the former three times Prime Minister of Pakistan and one of the key politicians of PML (N) are to slander, criticize, ridicule or dismiss authority of other parties, political leaders and institutions. These narratives were created to manipulate the discursive space to reach the audience in time and space. No matter whether or not the use of these narratives increased vote bank of PML(N) but they seem to express her political fervor, sentiments and engagement. The analysis of Maryam’s duality of us and them provides us a direction to investigate other politicians’ virtual positions. However, the present study looks into the tweets of Maryam to mirror superimposition of metanarrative by counter narratives.

It is important to note that Maryam has emerged as a dominant female politician in the present-day scenario. She has

been running her twitter account since 2012. She is rated as the most frequent user and respondent of the tweets. While we cannot go into all the details that the area really deserves, for this study, political tweets of Maryam were delimited to February and March 2018. These tweets covered important events to surface her emerging narrative especially during their time of accountability and public face saving. Among those events were: PML (N) won Lodhran elections, PML (N) ruled Senate elections (3rd Mar 2018), Nawaz Sharif was declared to be disqualified as Prime Minister (1 Feb 2018) and Shahbaz Sharif was selected as Party president (27th Feb 2018). The following methodology was chosen to address the underlying objectives.

Methodology

This study aims at revealing counter narratives which were constructed by Maryam in her tweets. The metanarrative of PML(N) was used as mirror to reveal the propagation of her ideas. A referential link to an official document (party Manifesto) helped authenticate the narrative analysis of the tweets in the context of metanarrative. This is a qualitative research. A purposive sampling technique was used to make a selection of the Tweets. The selected tweets were taken from the span of two months (February and March 2018) and numbered. The tweets were into English and Roman Urdu, which were transliterated into the English language. As mentioned above, a range of happenings in the month of February and March provided a more unbiased and multi-faceted analysis of the selected tweets. On the basis of the themes, Maryam's Tweets were classified

under four heads, such as; of her public appearance, conversational i.e., in a reply to any other politician's tweet, re-tweets and tweets of counter narrative. First three categories were excluded from the sample to develop thematic based narrative analysis as propounded by Riessman et.al (2008). Hence, the selected sample was composed of her personal tweets during February and March 2018.

Riessman et.al's (2008) narrative method provided us a lens to interpret the data. This method helped draw a link between the narrative and personal identity of the speaker. Riessman et.al (2008) has categorized the narration into two phases; firstly, the speaker develops narrative on a certain belief and then the narrative shapes the speaker's personality or sometimes group identity. The research is designed to investigate both the aspects in Maryam's tweets for evaluating the ideas which shape her tweets and then how her tweets shape her image as a politician. The coding of the data helped us reveal commonly emerging themes such as cult of personality, mudslinging, denial of facts, false statements, institutional writ, provocation and imposition. These themes were further supported by certain structural devices such as the use of motifs, figurative language, idiomatic phrases, slang, refrain, metaphor and so on.

Ethical Considerations

Since the data were collected in the context of free conversation, we could not forbid the use of racist and sexist language, and other contentious and provocative material (c.f. Ess, 2009). We

took an emic perspective to go further in-depth on the details of practices and beliefs of the participant. Whereas this perspective provided us rich descriptive reports about the nexus of Maryam's counter narratives, we might not rule out our unconscious political biases and background knowledge in the interpretation of the data sets, which seems to limit generalization of the findings. To counter this limitation, though we codified the data for the most reoccurring category and themes (regarding the counter narratives of Maryam) emerged in the comments and semiotic resources produced by the participants.

Analysis and Discussion

The present study is delimited to the counter narrative constructed by Maryam to relate with the growing tendency of the politicians' use of social media for defensive and offensive measures towards rival political parties. Maryam's tweets serve as an appropriate example of her defensive modus operandi regarding recent allegations against her father. There are counter narratives in her tweets directly hitting her political rivals especially PTI, the ruling party, PPP, the third largest party and the institutes of Pakistan such as Pakistani Army and Judiciary. The study showcases indirectly how much interest is shown by Pakistani politicians to propagate their agenda or constructive policies to serve the country as promised in Manifesto than to demeaning their political rivals.

Counter Narratives

Against rival political parties

The study finds that Maryam often passes comments on the leaders of other political parties. Her narratives are prone to enhance the prevalent friction between PML (N) and other leading political parties, contrarily to her party manifesto which is health and education, accountability, implementation of constitution, employment, promotion of agriculture, elimination of terrorism, availability of electricity, justice, international collaboration, democracy and prosperity. The tolerance, cooperation and plurality are the elements which hardly appear in her tweets. Tweets are posted to bring forth the flaws of other politicians or to blame them for defending herself. In one of her tweets, she attacked both the leaders of PPP and PTI, Asif Ali Zardari and Imran Khan respectively.

[1]

“Zardari aur umpire ki ungli ka beopari Teray darbar main puhinchay to sabi ek huay” [Zardari and dealer of umpire’s finger, all were equal when appeared before You (God)]

This tweet was posted during elections of senate March 2018. The expected results are reflected in her narrative. She has also openly criticized rival politicians, Asif Ali Zardari and Imran Khan for having involved in rigging and bilateral agreement to defeat PML (N). The reference to the dealer of umpire’s finger hints upon the match fixing and such scandals associated with cricketers. It has targeted Imran Khan, cricket legend and presently Prime Minister of Pakistan and Zardari has

also been sarcastically commented upon because of his scandals of corruption. She also announced the approaching time of accountability for them. The second line has a poetical reference taken from the poem of the national poet, Allama Iqbal. The verse taken from his poem "Shikwa" refers to the notion that all are accountable to God without any distinction. It also showed equality between the rich and the poor. Therefore, she is also developing a narrative for the public to think of others and their stories of corruption. Accountability is implicitly demanded here for others as well in the context where Sharif family is going through tough time of accountability regarding Panama case. In the Panama papers, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan (Nawaz Sharif) and his family were accused of money laundering through foreign companies. Imran Khan's personal life has been often commented upon in her tweets in a derogatory manner to conclude that he has no familial bond and concept of mutual respect.

Counter narrative against the institution of Pakistan

PML (N) party Manifesto states, "Democratic governance which requires supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law in order to reduce corruption..." (p.8).

In the Manifesto the major challenge mentioned which PML (N) government has to face is to maintain supremacy of law. The challenge has been taken up to proclaim that this supremacy was always put to question during the regime of other previous governments. The narratives of Maryam's tweets during the selected time zone have put court orders, proceedings

and JIT reports to question with reference to Panama case. Similarly, a pledge was made in Manifesto to establish, “An autonomous National Accountability Commission which is administratively, functionally and financially independent, with comprehensive powers to carry out across-the-board accountability of all holders of public offices in a fair, impartial and transparent manner” .. (p. 77).

For maintaining the metanarrative, Maryam Nawaz should not have resisted any establishment of this sort such as formation of JIT. On the other hand, in one of her tweets she propagates counter narrative by criticizing Joint Investigation Team (JIT).

[2]

“Whatsappzada JIT ka pehlay say the shudah agenda kay tehat ek kamray main beth ker report tayar kernaa asan hai mager adaalat main in chalakion ka diffa kerna na mumkin”.

[It is easy to make report while sitting in a room according to predetermined agenda of whatsapp influenced JIT, but it is impossible to defend this shrewdness in court.]

The analysis shows that any such organization which is not developed by PML (N) government will carry no worth in the eyes of PML (N) politicians. According to the firm belief in maintaining the solidarity of Pakistan, the courts of the country are deemed to be the most prestigious institution. Maryam has

made statements many a times about the merit and justice but in her tweets, she overtly attacked JIT and the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SCP) for making adverse decisions against her father. She shook the authenticity and validity of decisions made by JIT and reiterated counter narrative that official decrees were all pre-planned. Unfortunately, her counter narrative was not supported by any authentic information against official report of JIT and statements made by SCP.

Her counter attack on institutions of the country has also provoked suspicion for the followers. They are instigated to inquire,

[3]

“munsifon ko Allah ko bhi jawab dena ho ga aur awam ko bhi.”

[The Judges will have to be accountable before both Allah and the public].

Not so uncommon, she includes the followers in her narrative to strengthen her argument. Judges have been openly targeted to critique for shaking the political status of PML (N). She also developed a very adverse counter narrative in this regard by displaying Nehal Hashmi’s picture on her Facebook wall when SCP sentenced him for one-month imprisonment in contempt of the court. This action of her caused a rift among party members as well because Nehal Hasmi used abusive language against court publically. On the other hand, Maryam has been remarked as valiant speaker in PML (N) by the followers on her counter narrative against the Supreme court.

She challenged the trustworthiness of the decision of SCP about Nawaz Sharif's disqualification,

[4]

“Nawaz Sharif sahib ki naaehli ki derkhawast he nahi ki thi aur bughzwalon nay derkhawast parhay bagair hi faisla ker dia”

[There was no petition for Nawaz Sharif's disqualification but people of ill will made decision without having read the petition.]

In contrast to it the party manifesto that comprises a promise, “to reduce opportunities for corruption and also to ensure decisions on merit, existing laws and rules will be amended to withdraw all discretionary powers wherever possible / practical and instead provide for exercise of powers in a fair transparent and equitable manner” (p.77). Unlike this, she has constructed narratives in her tweets on constant measures of challenging the decisions of the court. She has also raised suspicions against transparency and competence of the relevant judges in Panama case because unlike the Panama scandal that Nawaz Sharif was originally booked for, he was disqualified by SCP for his affiliation as chairperson with a Dubai based company run by his family and for hiding his income through it. Also, the court referred his case to National Accountability Bureau for the investigation of corruption charges against him.

Denial of Facts

While discussing narratives it is significant to note that denial of facts is also categorized as a counter narrative. All efforts made by Maryam to avert any harm to the party reputation are subject to counter narrative. The unidirectional communication through tweets leads the followers to believe in the producer of the tweet which results in creating a narrative quite contrary to metanarrative. The narrative constructed to defend Sharif family is for the sake of them while it has given an impression that the metanarrative is meant for the masses.

While challenging the proceedings of SCP, she said:

[5]

“Aqama jaysa kamzor, badnam-e-zamana faisla is liye aya kion ke panama main na kuch tha na kuch nikla. Hamara jitna ehtasab hona tha ho gaya. Ab jhoton ki baari hai.”

[A weak and notorious decision like Aqama was made because there was nothing in Panama. Enough of our accountability! Now it is liars' turn]

Polarities have been defined in the tweet [5] between us and them. She has also blamed the decision of the court to be the most notorious decision ever decreed against someone. She has also portrayed that Aqama case is a mere fraud to defame Sharif family. The polarities are enhanced by challenging the liars who are absent in the communication for facing the music soon. The narration is to shift the focus to the absent political actors who

duly deserve anti-corruption investigation. Another example of denial of facts is as follows:

[6]

“Bilkul. Corruption ka saat mah main ek baar, ek baar bhi ziker tak na hua. Na hi kisi nay koi ilzam lagaya. Poora mamla zati karobar ke ird gird ghoom raha hai.”

[Certainly, during seven months, corruption was not even mentioned once. Nor anyone blamed us. The entire investigation was around personal business.]

In [6], the personal business has been reported as the main reason for the trial of Nawaz Sharif. The fact is denied here that despite many chances given by SCP, Nawaz Sharif could not submit money trail. Nawaz Sharif was given many chances to prove himself innocent which he failed and the matter eventually led to his disqualification. However, Maryam in her narrative blamed JIT members and Judges to manipulate the entire case with relevance to personal matters which has nothing to do with corruption. Panamgate Joint Investigation Team (JIT) head Wajid Zia declared on 27 March 2018 that the trust deeds submitted by Maryam and her brother Hassan are found to be forged (Dawn, 27 March 2018). The statement made by JIT head validates how she denied the facts through her narrative. Furthermore, Wajid Zia was also criticized in her later tweets to safeguard her dwindling position. Maryam has used refrain, “not even once” to emphasize that the court had no authentic documentation to prove them guilty. This notion of her goes

against Manifesto that authenticates the supremacy of law and honor of court to be maintained by PML (N).

Superimposition of Metanarrative

Cult of personality created instead of promoting party Progressive plans

It is considered that twitter is a mean to deliver the message to audience and make their opinion gradually and indirectly. On one hand, Maryam shares tweets of verbal attacks upon rival politicians, while on the other hand, tweets are shared to magnify the public image of PML (N) party leader Nawaz Sharif. The study shows that Nawaz Sharif was positioned in her narrations as the national hero. She supports him in the context of Panama case. The supremacy of the rule of law and the constitution was ensured through party metanarrative which seems to be neglected in her tweets. Nawaz Sharif's cult of personality is created to capture the followers and give them the feeling that he is the right leader for them. The tweet [7] refers to him as the chosen one.

[7]

“sadar ka sadar Nawaz sharif. Wazeer-e-azam ka wazir-e- Azam Nawaz sharif. Roksako to rok lo.”

[President of president is Nawaz Sharif. Prime Minister of prime minister is Nawaz Sharif. Do hinder, if you can.]

The axiomatic beginning of the tweet determines the positioning of the follower as a passive listener with no other choice. She has over exaggerated the fact that Nawaz Sharif was the best as the Prime Minister which echoes the rumor of general public that the President of Pakistan (Mamnoon Hussain) is a dummy president planted by Nawaz Sharif to have a smooth sail in his regime. Her tweet mocks the democratic system that prevails in Pakistan which shows that no matter who is on seat, only the rules who has the power to control. The party Manifesto ensures a transparent democratic system for the progress of Pakistan. It ensures the public that power will lie with people, for people and in their best interest but her tweets do not coincide with the metanarrative of party Manifesto. Tweets support the idea that no matter what happens Nawaz Sharif is the right leader for Pakistan. Her narrative has grown out of the bounds of the metanarrative which was previously manipulated to force Pervaiz Musharraf to resign. The last caption “Rok sako to rok lo” has been used as a refrain in most of her tweets to make it a public slogan. This also motivates the follower by announcing an unending effort of PML-N against all odds and the reader is positioned in the narrative to reiterate the caption on various other occasions. The same cult of personality is denoted in [8].

[8]

“Hard times lead to greatest moments. Strongest steel is forged in the hottest fire. It’s worth fighting for. Someone had to, for Pakistan.”

The tweet presents Nawaz Sharif's trial as a struggle for the nation. She has used the metaphor of "steel forged in the fire" to become even purer and stronger. An historical narrative is constructed that a new and great moment can be seen as a result of this struggle of Nawaz Sharif. The struggle has been associated with the future of Pakistan though hard times that Nawaz Sharif is passing through are of personal nature. The narrative is developed to persuade the public to accept and promote with zeal what is associated with the future of Pakistan i.e., Nawaz Sharif. The tweets were generated to save his public image at the cost of rebelling against the social institutions.

Provocation / Imposition of counter narrative upon the followers

Maryam has used provocative words in [9] to engage the followers. Her tweets involve the followers and reflect their future reactions that seem to be a guideline to the masses by her.

[9]

"awam ke faislon ki toheen hoti hai to un ke faislay bhi sakht ho jatay hain. Unke wazir-e-azam ko nikala jaye to who bhi notice laitay hain".

[If public decisions are dishonored then their decisions become more rigid. If their Prime Minister is ousted then they also take notice of it]

She has often provoked the followers to favor her stance and the voice of PML (N) against opposition and JIT. She has

declared that the public has been offended by the decision of SCP to provoke the party workers and the public to stage a protest against the decision. In the same connection tweets posted during Lodhran election are significant. She reflected that the people of Pakistan have rejected the decision of SCP through their ballots. This has explicitly revealed polarity in her tweets where the voice of people is likely to join her narrative as she claimed after Lodhran election results. The tweet has indirectly hinted upon the option what the public should choose from. She claims in [10] that the public supported PML (N) against the decision of SCP. A notice from court has been referred to make the point that the public has power to challenge the court.

[10]

“awam nay waziah ker dia ke vote ke taqadus ko pamal nahi honay diya jayega. Aur Nawaz Sharif ki qayadat main vote ki hurmat ka carvan manzil per puhanch ker hee dam lay ga.”

[Public has made it obvious that sanctity of vote will not be ruined. And under the leadership of Nawaz Sharif the caravan of the sanctity of vote will only stop after reaching the destination.]

She takes sides with the public and speaks on their behalf in [10]. The tweet shows that the journey that she started with Nawaz Sharif has been joined by the public and will go on to meet its logical destination. She has assigned a significant role to the public to fight for good cause. They are now moving from the role of the reader to the actor and their action will be in the

trance of the said responsibility upon them. There is no study about the political influence on youth through tweets in Pakistan, yet it cannot be denied that social media is the most used and liked medium for disseminating information among youth to hold demonstrations. There are long chains of responses to every tweet of Maryam by her followers which authenticate the possibility of public influence as supported by Barisione and Michailidou (2017) who argue that the ever-growing influence of the social media plays a crucial role in creating awareness and spreading voice on issues that the mainstream media does not cover. The following tweet [11] provokes the followers, imposes opinion on them and assigns a role of the actor to them.

[11]

“No, we will never accept verdict, our leader was, is, and always will Nawaz Sharif Pakistan favorite, people favorite leader”.

Personal Narrative

Personal narrative is associated with storytelling related to personal experiences. In this research it is noticed that Maryam has developed personal narrative which always revolves around herself, her father, her perception and her truth. She did not have futuristic account in her tweets even after having won Lodhran elections. A reference to Manifesto made it obvious that filing one’s assets has been suggested in it, “All holders of public offices will be required to file statements of assets and liabilities prior to assuming office and every year thereafter, which will be

made available to the public and the concerned authorities for scrutiny" (p. 77). On the other hand, she created a family story for justifying what the Sharif family is.

[12]

"Dada sayasat main nahi thay. Ek visionary aur mehnti insane thay. 1930 say karobar ker rahay thay aur 50 aur 60 ki dihai main kae factorion kay malik thay".

[Grandfather was not in politics. He was a visionary and hard worker. He had been working since 1930. He was the owner of many factories in the decade of 50s and 60s.]

She does not talk about the agenda for better Pakistan or party plans in upcoming years as she often claims to win the expected elections 2018. She also targets others for building her image, her father's reputation and party stability. In a very compact tweet, she narrated the entire effort of her grandfather for raising money to secure their future which lacks factual credibility. In party Manifesto, it has also been promised that a culture of accountability will be introduced in Pakistan. The post panama tweets have reflected Maryam's major concern with family status and reputation; therefore, she hardly comments on accountability on merit and for all. She developed a personal narrative that all done to them is unjust and she never demands merit in accountability, rather the very status of accountability of a party leader and Prime Minister is unacceptable for her.

Conclusion

Maryam is emerging as a woman political leader who has been successful in engaging her followers on twitter. The analysis of her tweets shows that apart from metanarrative of the political party, she has framed narratives in her tweets to develop sympathy for her father Nawaz Sharif, family and political party PML (N). The study also reveals that she twisted the prevalent ideas to shape others' opinions in her favor. Moreover, her counter narrative to the queries and statements of the Supreme Court lacks support of authentic documentation and information. The study unearths how she generates a counter narrative and suppresses her own previously proclaimed and propagated metanarrative to counter attack the opponents. It has been analyzed that counter narrative has grown intense as compared to reinforcement of metanarrative to defame others and build rival polarities. Her narratives are analyzed to be conveying false notion in contrast to case proceedings by the court yet inaccuracies tweeted often gain attention of the followers especially youth to believe at first and then to spread out among others to influence the real-world discourse. Maryam tried to reconstruct the lost image of her father through her narratives by denying the facts, however a very smaller number of political vision-based tweets are found during this time period. This study suggests an exploration of whether or not the narratives constructed by politicians in the cyber space coincide with the metanarrative of their respective political parties and what is their influence on youth regarding political activism in Pakistan?

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