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## THE JOURNEY OF #METOO: EVOLUTION OF SELF-HELP ORGANISATION TO A DIGITAL MOVEMENT

ARUNDHATI SHARMA

Assistant Professor of English,

Amity University.

Email: [asharma@ptn.amity.edu](mailto:asharma@ptn.amity.edu); [arundhatisharma222@gmail.com](mailto:arundhatisharma222@gmail.com)



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### Abstract

This article seeks to examine how a self-help group started in 2006 by Tarana Burke, became a digital movement in 2017. A twitter post by Alyssa Milano took over the social media by storm. For the first time, the victims of sexual violence were not experiencing victim blaming the idea of 'empowerment through empathy' helped a lot of victims to speak up for themselves and become survivors. We will see how and why the movement was able to bring all the victims together on a social media platform. This movement has brought the survivor's healing story to the forefront. This article also shows how the movement brought about the downfall of so many powerful people who were exposed as perpetrators of sexual violence. The trauma after sexual violence has no visible scars. The theoretical framework for the study will revolve around theories of representation of power in understanding how mainstream media represents the #MeToo movement on their news websites. This movement has added a new dimension to the gender studies and how it deals with sexual violence. It has also helped us understand the victims and empathize with them with sensitivity rather than resorting to victim shaming and victim blaming like it was done in the past.

Keywords: #MeToo, Gender-based Violence, social media, Sexual Violence

MeToo was a movement started by Tarana Burke in 2006 as a response to a large amount of sexual violence experienced by the people of her community. She wrote down the word 'MeToo' on a paper and noted down an action plan on changing the society around her where black and brown girls were regularly experiencing sexual violence. The agenda behind this movement was to provide 'empowerment through empathy', that would go a long way in helping the victims find a way to connect with each other and heal. This movement was for the survivors and how they get over the trauma

caused to them due to the violence they have experienced. It's their journey from being victims to survivors.

In 2006, Tarana Burke launched Me Too—a non-profit organisation where the idea was to help the victims of sexual violence heal themselves by sharing their stories. It focused on giving space to the women who were side-lined and marginalised because of their gender. The victims got a platform to share their experiences and rather than being judged, they were empathised by others who went through the similar experience of sexual assault. In

an interview with Ebony magazine, Tarana Burke talks about how the movement is victim-centric and focuses on “empowerment through empathy.” It was some kind of “a catchphrase which would be used by survivors and get transmitted to other folks in need. They will not feel alone knowing that a movement for radical change was happening and was possible” (Hill 2017).

Twelve years later in 2017, #MeToo was used by a celebrity Alysa Milano in her tweet. Milano invited people to write #metoo as a comment to her post if they have experienced any kind of sexual violence. Then she commented on her post #metoo. The post received an overwhelming response within 24hours. Overnight the movement became viral like a wildfire. Both men and women started sharing their stories. The movement that was started by Tarana Burke, suddenly gained momentum in 2017 and started unmasking all the powerful perpetrators. The agenda was to bring the problem of sexual violence to forefront. Within days, Twitter and other social media platforms started flooding with #MeToo posts. People started sharing their experience and rather than victim blaming, they were empathised. Even the hotlines for sexual assault witness a huge hike in the number of callers post this movement. Somehow the movement has also become synonymous with bringing down men or tainting the name and image of powerful men. The movement is misinterpreted and thus suffers temporary backlash sometimes.

The final months of 2017 have witnessed the birth of a movement the #Metoo movement, which started after several Hollywood actresses accused famed producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment. The movement is an ongoing prevalent phenomenon on social media where its aim is to demonstrate the frequency of widespread sexual harassment in all sectors of work, whereas the movement media has been widely reporting on has given a platform to several women to speak out their truths. Weinstein’s predatory practices were no secret (journalists and actresses had tried to publicize Weinstein’s sexual predation on prior occasions, to no avail), this time the response was swift (Kelland, 2016). Four male members of

Weinstein’s board of directors resigned within 24 hours of the allegations being publicized.

Soon after the removal of Weinstein by his board members, there was a suit filed against him. This overwhelming response towards the sexual victims gave courage and strength to many victims to come forward and share their experiences with other Hollywood royalty. Most of the top A-list celebrities were exposed and soon this spread to other arenas. There were multiple allegations of sexual assault against Kevin Spacey on twitter because of which he had to lose his standing as one of Hollywood’s elite (Levit, 2016). Jeffrey Tambor resigned from his leading role on the Amazon hit Transparent, following multiple allegations of sexual harassment.

The unveiling of Harvey Weinstein and the surge of sexual violence cases following the #MeToo movement has revealed the value of social media and other platforms that has helped the victims to rise and speak up for themselves. The discussion of such assaults was mostly limited to rare conversations or secret groups. There was so much of stigma attached to it that the victims could not find the courage to speak up for themselves. Now the world and the stories have found a place in newspapers, blogs, Twitter, and other social media houses that are keen to publish the stories about the experiences of the victims. (Panahi, 2017).

The rise of #MeToo and its surge has revealed the challenges the victims and the survivors of sexual assault continue to face in articulating their experiences. Though the legal options are always available, but somehow it fails to justify the purpose and utility of its existence. It is marginally helpful for the victims, not everyone has been able to get justice through the legal channels. (Du Mont et al. 2003; Estrich 1987).

In my research, I aim to conduct a comparative study of how three mainstream media outlets have covered the moment on their websites. The media outlets chosen are Aljazeera, BBC, and CNN. The theoretical framework for the study will revolve around theories of representation, power, and to help in understanding how mainstream media represents the #Metoo movement on their

news websites, Articles will be analysed through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. The study concluded that the #Metoo movement is represented through a constructionist approach, and there are minor differences between the three distinctive international mainstream media news websites.

### **Theoretical Framework and Concept**

In this section are the theories that will act as a structure to guide the analysis of the representation of the #Metoo movement in mainstream media. Hence, identifying the society's relationship with a movement whose aim is to become a platform for women all over the world to support each other, spread awareness and bring social change through social media and mainstream media which aims to influence people.

In this study where the main notion is to understand how the #Metoo movement and its female supporters are represented in the media, the theory of representation was deemed appropriate. For identifying the relation of these media organizations and the causes for portraying the movement and its female supporters, the theories of power and ideology were used to give an additional insight in regard to the data's findings.

While Andrea Dworkin (1993) estimated that a woman is raped every three minutes in the United States alone, recent projections suggest it may be closer to a rape every minute (Solnit, 2013). In a survey of over 6,000 college students across 32 colleges and universities, 54% of women interviewed were found to be survivors of an attempted or completed rape (Koss, 1988), and many studies have reported similar findings (Russell, 1982; Schiffman, 2010). While people with disabilities are disproportionately victimized (Johnson & Sigler, 2000; Statistics Canada, 1995), it is also the case that "one in five women will be raped in her lifetime" (Solnit, 2013). These are frightening statistics, to be sure, but more frightening is the fact that as recently as 1991, 76% of high-school-age boys interviewed, believed "forced sex" was totally acceptable under certain circumstances (White & Humphrey, 1991), and in 2003, the FBI found that although the overall rate of serious crimes had

decreased over the previous year, rape was the sole violent crime that had increased significantly across the country (Schiffman, 2010). Although the rate of reported rape itself has decreased over the years, it remains unclear whether this is a result of fewer people reporting their rape (Fahrenthold, 2006). Even more disconcerting is that phrasing the problem in the usual way— "women are raped"— entirely ignores the people responsible for it. In effect, the perpetrator is made invisible (Katz, 2012). It would be more accurate and more honest to say: "A man rapes a woman every minute."

It is important to note this fact that to ignore it or to frame the issue as "us" vs. "them" or "normal people" vs. "the rapists"—is to at once shift the blame from the perpetrator to the victim and misdiagnose the problem by refusing to acknowledge the gendered aspect of rape (Ford, 2012; Katz, 2012; Penny 2012). It was found that male rapists statistically commit between 98% and 99% of all reported rapes (De Santis, 2012; Greenfeld, 1997; Seña, Arlene C., et al. 2015; Tatum, 2008), while 9 out of 10 victims are girls and women, 80% of whom are under the age of 30 (Rainn, 2009). Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis, this does mean that a percentage of rape victims are men. Even in these cases though, the perpetrator is usually another boy or man, suggesting that an analysis of this gendered element is vital. Many rapes and sexual assaults go unreported.

According to the Bureau of Justice Special Report in 2003 (Indiana Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2011), there are an estimated 5 rapes for every 1 reported, while SexAssault.ca (2012) suggests just 6 out of every 100 sexual assaults are reported. Furthermore, the reality of prevalent and systemic racism adds to this problem for People of Colour; for example, in large part of history of violent racism in Canada, 57% of Aboriginal women have been sexually assaulted (Sexual Assault, 2012). Similarly, due to racism in the United States, African-American women report roughly 1 out of every 15 rapes (INCASA, 2011; Beaudrow, 2014.). The problem of rape and sexual assault, therefore, is larger than can be competently assessed. Concomitantly, while white men commit the vast majority of rapes, African-American men are much

more likely to be charged, convicted, and incarcerated for rape (Weinberg & Biernbaum, 1993). Although anti-rape education in schools in general and as a specific element of sex education is obviously needed, it is also apparent that social justice education (involving anti-racist and anti-ableist pedagogy) must be included in core curricula as well.

Rape is about power, though, not sex (Filipovic, 2013), so it is perhaps unsurprising that rape also manifests as a “weapon of war” (DelVecchio, 2011). In Africa, Kosovo, and Iraq, for example, invading forces routinely rape women (DelVecchio, 2011) in an effort to demoralize the home troops (Seifert, 1994). Adding to the tragedy is that these facts are often manipulated by people at home in order to dismiss domestic sexism by pointing to places such as Iraq as the examples of “real” rape cultures, a habit that says more about this culture than Iraq’s, since the practice effectively conveys the following: “You think forced flirting is bad, but there’s worse things we could force on you” (Marcotte, 2012). In this way, everyday misogyny is excused and normalized.

Looking at the wider culture—the beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and the institutions that express them—in which rape not only exists but flourishes. Rape culture is demonstrated in a variety of ways, such as in the values and assumptions about women’s and men’s “natural” propensities and in the stereotypes about women’s sexual desire (or lack thereof) in comparison to men. These stereotypes are often based upon assumptions about biology and its function as a supposed explanation for the act of rape as an evolutionary imperative. As well, the different valuing of women’s and men’s experiences in society when it comes to arguing the existence of rape culture has allowed men to deny its existence while framing the common occurrence of rape as an aberration committed by “evil” people (rather than by otherwise “normal” men). Rape culture is also demonstrated in the norms that govern interactions and that are then the foundation for disputes between women and men, and in the institutions such as courts and police enforcement that reinforce these norms (such as blaming women for their own victimization).

Statistics show us the number of women who have experienced sexual violence. The National Statistics on Sexual Violence released a series of statistics: One out of four women will experience sexual assault or harassment in their lifetime. One in six women will experience attempted or completed rape at some point in their lives. The victim knows the perpetrator in eight out of ten rape cases (Cantor et al, 2019). The phrase “cold hard facts” comes to mind when reading those statistics. That’s all the stats invoke, however. Devastating as they may be, numbers communicate information in a seemingly distant fashion. After all, the women in your life could be the three in four who have not experienced sexual violence. The numbers do not provide any insight into the pain or experiences felt by women, they tell you only that a significant proportion of the female population share similar experiences. While it can be easy to gloss over numbers, stories hold our attention, and can drive home women’s suffering. Numbers are abstract and distancing; stories can be movingly concrete. Women have been sharing their stories about sexual violence for a long time. On October 15, 2017, Alyssa Milano turned to Twitter asking her followers to reply with two words – “me too,” if they have ever experienced sexual assault or harassment. What followed was a surge of personal stories relating to this singular request.

### **The Public Presentation of the Movement**

The #MeToo hashtag exploded into a firestorm of victims speaking out about their experience with rape and sexual assault. As more Americans, predominantly white women, shared their own stories of survival, an extensive conversation around sexual assault, accountability, sexism, and violence against women emerged (CNN, 2020). The movement had a ripple effect, soon enough more high-profile men were exposed for their abusive behaviour. State Senators, CEO’s, actors, and editors got fired for the accusations of sexual misconduct. After Weinstein, it was Lockhart Steele, Editorial Director at Vox Media, who got fired after admitting to sexual harassment of at least one person. Then Roy Prince, Head of Amazon Studios, resigned after a Hollywood producer accused him of unwanted sexual behaviours.

Kevin Spacey, famous Hollywood actor, was accused of forcing himself on a minor. Many other men came forward confirming more of Spacey's inappropriate advances (The New York Times, 2020). Survivors were not only tweeting but going to Human Resources, telling their own managers, calling reporters, and openly pointing out the men that harassed or abused them. Companies were firing these men more quickly because they didn't want to tarnish their brand. The digital sphere served as an effective weapon for #MeToo because it got the accusations out quick, gave women the leverage they didn't have before, and forced companies to make decisions about how to react to accusations of sexual assault in their work environment. The year before the New York Times article, less than 30 high-profile people had made the news for being fired on accusations of sexual assault. After the October article specific to Weinstein, at least 200 prominent men lost their jobs based on sexual assault allegations (The New York Times, 2020).

Companies couldn't ignore the millions of women writing #MeToo on social media, using the specific names of those men in television interviews, threatening to boycott brands with corporate leaders accused of sexual harassment, and protesting outside office buildings. The digital sphere allowed them to undermine the brand value of companies at a much faster pace when associated with sexual assault. For so long, women had gone to work at big banks or law firms in their high heels and suit skirts, hoping they could get into that meeting with the top lawyers, the top investment bankers. They were just as smart, just as qualified, but just not male. But even once they got in the room, they weren't prepared for what happened when the door closed. Ashley Judd recalls her experience with Weinstein in an ABC Exclusive interview shortly after her story came to light, "He asked me to pick out his suit for the day and steered me into the closet." (Ashley, 2020).

These women were sharing in detail the traumatic moments they lived with in silence for so long. The firing of these powerful men demonstrated the impact of the hashtag and the disruption of the sexism and harassment that

thrived in traditional workplace environments. The fear of repercussions, of never sitting in on the board meeting or having rumours spread across the office, has historically kept women silent. #MeToo became a new space in the digital sphere where people could share their experiences while finding solidarity with other victims and survivors. And still, not all testimonies of sexual assault guaranteed positive outcomes.

These current feminist movements do not exclusively live in the digital sphere, but the creation and use of hashtags keep it there and allow for conversations and connections across technology. Me Too changed drastically from its 2006 creation by Tarana Burke, into an internet phenomenon, a movement, and a call to action. Hollywood grabbed it and it has had a rippling effect across many domains, spreading the discussions and the confrontations with stories of sexual assault. But just as the women of colour in D.C. explained, the conditions of sexual assault and gender inequality were not experienced or discussed equally, especially across race and class lines.

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