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Digital Activism among Girls in War Zones: A Focus on Bana Alabed's *Dear World*

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Abstract

This paper explored the area of digital activism with a focus on the narratives of girls as exemplified in Bana Alabed's memoir, *Dear World.* The world is experiencing an era where online platforms serve as powerful avenues for self-expression and advocacy. This study aimed to explore how young girls utilize digital spaces to share their stories, thereby amplifying their voices, and engaging in activism. The research employed a qualitative approach, analyzing the content of Bana Alabed's *Dear World* to understand the experiences and expressions of the girls in War-Torn Syria. By examining the varied dimensions of digital activism, the paper sought to unravel the impact of these virtual platforms on shaping narratives among young girls who are facing adversity. Through an in-depth analysis of the text and drawing on the Post-Colonial Feminist theoretical framework, the research aimed to contribute to the understanding of the connectedness between digital activism and the empowerment of girls. The findings of this study provided more knowledge about the ways in which technology can serve as a tool for engendering social change and amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals, especially girls.

Keywords: Bana Alabed, Syria, War, Digital Activism, Advocacy, Girls, Dear World, twitter

Introduction

The conflict in Syria is a complex and many-faceted crisis that has evolved over several decades. While the modern conflict gained significant momentum in 2011, its roots can be traced back to historical, political, and even social factors. The political landscape witnessed instability, and a series of coups shaped the country's early years of independence (Pearlman, 4). In 1970, Hafez al-Assad seized power in a coup, establishing a Ba'athist regime characterized by authoritarian rule. His presidency, marked by centralization of power and suppression of dissent, set the stage for the events to come (Sorenson, 8). In 2000, Hafez's son, Bashar al-Assad, assumed the presidency amidst initial hopes for political liberalization. The discontent that led to the conflict began to Increase in 2011 with the Arab Spring, which was a wave of protests across the Middle East. In Syria, peaceful demonstrations demanding political reforms escalated into a full-scale uprising (Ensor, 8). The government's harsh response increased tensions, and led to widespread unrest. By the middle of 2011, the situation had escalated into a full-blown civil war.

Various factions emerged, each with distinct objectives and alliances. Hinnesbuch (22) explains that the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was made up of defected military personnel, while Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and later, ISIS, gained prominence. The conflict drew in regional and international players, further complicating it (Sorenson, 11). Within the war-torn areas of Syria, girls face unique challenges that demand urgent attention. Beyond the general hardships imposed by conflict, girls have to deal with specific issues such as increased risks of gender-based violence, limited access to education, and heightened health concerns. The disruption of social structures and protective networks heightens

these challenges, leaving girls exposed to the harsh realities of war in distinct ways (Ensor, 3).

However, amid the devastation, agents of change and activism still emerge to provide hope. It is essential to shift the narrative from victimization to empowerment, in order to acknowledge the strength and determination displayed by the girls facing adversity. Their resilience becomes a source of inspiration. They challenge stereotypes and emphasize the indomitable spirit that refuses to be conquered by the harsh realities of war.

Post-Colonial Feminism

This research is hinged on the theoretical framework, Postcolonial Feminism. It deals with gender and colonialism, examining how historical power structure continue to influence the experiences of women, particularly in the context of the postcolonial world (Weedon, 12). This framework acknowledges the diverse struggles faced by women and girls in societies marked by colonial histories, seeking to unravel the complexities of their identities and narratives. The justification for employing a postcolonial feminist lens in the analysis of Digital Activism in *Dear World* lies in the inherent connections between technology, colonial legacies, and gender issues. Digital platforms serve as spaces where the voices of marginalized individuals, including girls, can be amplified. Postcolonial feminism allows for a more detailed exploration of how these voices navigate the remnants of colonial structures. It sheds light on the unique challenges faced by girls engaging in digital activism within postcolonial contexts.

Numerous scholars have contributed to the discourse surrounding Postcolonial Feminism Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her seminal work "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," critiques Western feminist perspectives that homogenize the experiences of women in the global South. Mohanty (8) emphasizes the need to recognize and respect diverse

narratives, a crucial aspect when analyzing Digital Activism in the context of girls featured in *Dear World.*

Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" becomes relevant in understanding the positionality of girls engaging in Digital Activism. Spivak urges scholars to listen to the voices of those often marginalized, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the agency of individuals within postcolonial settings. (McEwan, 5). When applied to the analysis of *Dear World*, this perspective encourages a careful examination of how girls utilize digital platforms to challenge dominant narratives and amplify their agency.

A Brief Synopsis of Dear ***World*** **by Bana Alabed**

Dear World serves as an interesting chronicle of the trials and triumphs of a young soul despite the ravages of the Syrian conflict. Bana Alabed, born in 2009, became a symbol of hope as she took to social media to share her daily life, thoughts, and the harsh realities faced by her family in war-torn Aleppo (Hinnesbuch, 14). The book, co-authored with her mother, Ghada Alabed, provides a detailed portrayal of the Syrian war through the eyes of an innocent yet resilient child. Within the pages of *Dear World*, Bana portrays clear images with her words. She creates emotions that reflect the turbulent land she calls home. From the mundane routines disrupted by air raids to the profound loss of friends and family, the narrative unfolds with a stark honesty.

The significance of *Dear World* lies in its unique perspective because it provides a first-hand account of the Syrian conflict from the eyes of a girl who navigates the horrors of war with courage. Bana's narrative transcends statistics and news headlines, as it humanizes the struggle of the Syrian people, particularly the younger generation. In a world often ignorant of the human cost of conflict, *Dear World* serves as a stark reminder of the impact on the lives of innocent children. Bana Alabed becomes a symbol of

not only survival but also of activism, as she uses her voice to reveal the plight of her people and demand global attention to the atrocities happening in Syria.

Digital Activism

Digital activism, also known as online activism or cyber activism, has emerged as a potent force in contemporary society, redefining social and political engagement. In academia and activism, the term "digital activism" refers to the use of digital technologies, primarily the internet and social media platforms, to promote and enact social or political change. This mode of activism leverages the power of online connectivity to mobilize individuals, amplify voices, and challenge established norms and systems. (Ohar, 13)

In recent years, the area of activism has undergone a profound transformation due to the proliferation of digital tools. Social media platforms, blogs, and online forums have become spaces where individuals can express their views, share information, and organize collective action. Digital activism has proven to be a dynamic force, facilitating global movements, raising awareness about various issues, and providing a platform for marginalized voices (McCaughey, 4).

Defining the boundaries of digital activism involves understanding the many-faceted nature of activities carried out in the digital space. Digital activism encompasses a spectrum of tactics, from grassroots movements organized through social media campaigns to sophisticated cyber-attacks aimed at challenging oppressive regimes (Vitak, 7). Its scope extends beyond geographical and cultural boundaries as it creates a globalized space for activism where individuals from diverse backgrounds can converge around shared causes (Ghobadi, 9). The use of digital platforms enables activists to transcend traditional barriers, as they reach wider audiences and strengthen a sense of community among like-minded individuals. This interconnectedness has led to the emergence of new forms of activism, such as hashtag activism,

online petitions, virtual protests-each playing a unique role in influencing public discourse and challenging unfavourable policies. The effectiveness of online activism varies across different regions and social groups. Understanding this unique avenue is essential for understanding the role digital activism plays in amplifying voices and influencing social change.

Relevance of Digital Activism in the Contemporary Societal Context

In the contemporary societal context, digital activism has emerged as a powerful force. It has influenced the mode of social and political engagement. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected through technology, the role of digital platforms in facilitating activism, particularly among marginalized groups, has gained prominence. Writers have explored the transformative potential of digital spaces in amplifying voices that were historically marginalized, thus providing a platform for individuals and groups to express their concerns and advocate for social change (Ghobadi, 3).

Digital activism transcends traditional boundaries. It allows individuals to connect globally and mobilize support for various causes. Damphouse (56) adds that the rise of social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, has enabled activists to disseminate information rapidly and engage with diverse audiences. This instantaneous connectivity has proven instrumental in handling issues that may have otherwise been overlooked. Within this context, examining the digital activism of girls, as exemplified in Bana Alabed's *Dear World*, becomes crucial for understanding how these platforms empower young voices and contribute to wider conversations on social justice.

Bana Alabed's *Dear World* serves as a clear example of the impact that digital activism can have on a global scale. The compelling narrative of a young Syrian girl using Twitter to document her experiences amid conflict not only exposes the harsh realities faced

by many but also underscores the potential for digital platforms to be vehicles of advocacy and awareness. Through her digital presence, Bana Alabed transcended geographical borders, as she garnered international attention and support (Ayers, 7), thus illustrating the transformative power of digital activism in amplifying the voices of the marginalized. Digital activism emphasizes its role in challenging existing power structures and encourages a participatory culture. It enables individuals to engage in dialogue, organize movements, and influence public opinion. However, scholars also acknowledge the complexities and challenges associated with digital activism, including issues of online harassment and misinformation. Therefore, in studying girls' digital activism, it is imperative to critically examine the intricacies and considerations inherent in leveraging digital platforms for social change.

The relevance of digital activism in the contemporary society cannot be overstated. The interconnectedness of our digital world provides a unique space for individuals, especially marginalized voices like those of young girls, to engage in activism and contribute meaningfully to social and political discourses. Bana Alabed's *Dear World* stands as a proof of the transformative potential of digital activism.

The Role of Digital Activism in Girls' Empowerment

In *Dear World*, Bana Alabed's use of digital activism exemplifies how young girls in war zones leverage social media to amplify their voices and seek global attention. Through her tweets, she not only documents the horrors of the Syrian war but also challenges the world's inaction, thus positioning herself as an advocate for affected children. Alabed's digital presence aligns with Castells' assertion that online spaces enable marginalized voices to transcend geographical barriers and strengthen global solidarity. Her consistent engagement on Twitter allowed her to connect with

activists, world leaders, and media organizations, ensuring that her story reached a broader audience.

Furthermore, *Dear World* illustrates how digital activism empowers girls by providing them with a platform to challenge oppressive narratives. Bana Alabed's ability to use Twitter to document bombings, starvation, and displacement highlights the role of digital spaces in giving war-affected girls agency. Unlike traditional media, which often silences or marginalizes children's voices, social media enables real-time storytelling, making the experiences of young girls more visible. Through her advocacy, Alabed proves that digital activism is not just about storytelling but also about mobilizing support and sparking global conversations on war and children's rights.

The Influence of Social Media in Amplifying Girls' Voices

Social media plays a pivotal role in *Dear World* as Alabed strategically utilizes Twitter to broadcast her experiences and demand international attention. Her tweets, such as *"I just want to live without fear"*, resonated globally, attracting responses from figures like Malala Yousafzai and J.K. Rowling. This reflects the transformative power of digital activism, as it allows young girls like Alabed to bypass traditional gatekeepers and speak directly to the world.

Additionally, *Dear World* highlights how social media fosters solidarity among girls in war zones. Alabed's interactions with other activists demonstrate how digital spaces create support networks, reinforcing Edwards et al.'s argument that online communities strengthen resilience. Her viral tweets led to humanitarian interventions, showcasing how digital activism is not just about awareness but also about effecting tangible change.

Moreover, the novel portrays how social media enables girls to challenge societal norms. In conservative war-torn societies, young girls are often expected to remain silent. However, through her

digital activism, Alabed defies these expectations, asserting her voice in a space where children—especially girls—are rarely heard. Her tweets serve as a reminder that even in the most hostile environments, social media can be a tool for empowerment, resistance, and advocacy.

Dear World as a Product of Digital Activism

The Syrian conflict, which erupted in 2011, profoundly impacted the life of Bana Alabed, a young girl from Aleppo who became an unexpected voice for children living through war. As her city endured relentless bombings, loss of life, and the destruction of basic infrastructure, including schools, Bana and her family were thrust into survival mode. The war disrupted her education and forced her family into a desperate struggle for safety. Instead of remaining silent, Bana and her mother, Fatemah, turned to Twitter as a means of speaking out against the atrocities around them.

In 2016, at just seven years old, Bana, with the help of her mother, began tweeting from the account @AlabedBana. Through short, heartfelt messages, she documented the daily horrors of life in Aleppo, calling for international intervention and pleading for peace. Her tweets, such as *"I am very afraid I will die tonight"*, quickly gained global attention, drawing responses from world leaders, activists, and humanitarian organizations. Twitter became her tool for digital activism, allowing her to bypass traditional media and connect directly with a global audience. The widespread impact of her digital activism culminated in the publication of *Dear World* in 2017. The book is not merely a memoir but a literary product of her activism, chronicling her experiences in war-torn Syria while amplifying the same urgent messages she first shared on Twitter. *Dear World* is the result of her viral digital presence—it translates her real-time activism into a structured, reflective narrative, giving permanence to her calls for justice and peace. The novel achieves several key objectives as a product of digital activism:

1. **Exposing the Realities of the Syrian War** – *Dear World* details the bombings, the loss of innocent lives, and the devastation of Aleppo, providing an intimate, firsthand account of war's brutal impact on civilians, particularly children. Through Bana's storytelling, readers are confronted with the human cost of conflict, making it impossible to ignore the plight of Syrian families.
2. **Giving Voice to the Voiceless** – As a young girl in a war zone, Bana represents a marginalized group often excluded from mainstream narratives. By using Twitter—and later, *Dear World*—she asserts agency, proving that even a child can challenge the world's indifference. Her story highlights the vulnerability of women and girls during war, reinforcing the importance of allowing those affected to tell their own stories.
3. **A Call for Global Peace** – Bana's digital activism was never just about her own survival; it was a plea for the world to take action against war. *Dear World* continues this advocacy, reinforcing the need for diplomatic intervention, humanitarian aid, and policies that prioritize the protection of civilians.
4. **Encouraging Global Solidarity** – The international response to Bana's tweets demonstrated the power of social media in uniting people across borders. Her story rallied humanitarian organizations, politicians, and activists, proving that digital activism can inspire tangible support for war-affected populations. The publication of *Dear World* ensures that this solidarity is not fleeting, preserving her message for future generations.
5. **Humanizing Conflict** – One of the most powerful aspects of *Dear World* is its ability to transform statistics into personal experiences. By sharing her daily fears, joys, and struggles, Bana makes the war relatable to readers worldwide. This humanization is crucial in changing

perceptions of refugees and war survivors, fostering empathy and, ultimately, driving action.

Twitter as a Tool for Enacting Change

Since digital activism is about using social media to effect change, *Dear World* illustrates how Bana used Twitter as her weapon against silence. By directly engaging with the world, she was able to:

- Attract global media attention, leading to interviews with major news outlets.
- Gain support from influential figures like J.K. Rowling and Malala Yousafzai, amplifying her voice even further.
- Raise awareness about the dire situation in Aleppo, influencing humanitarian responses.
- Secure an evacuation for herself and her family when the war reached its peak, proving that digital activism can yield real-life impact.

Synopsis of *Dear World*

Bana Alabed is a young girl from war-torn Syria, whose activism goes beyond the chaos surrounding her. Bana begins her narrative by offering readers a glimpse into her pre-war childhood. However, as conflict erupted, her childhood became a story of survival. Through her heartfelt letters, Bana reveals the raw impact of war on the lives of children.

The pages of *Dear World* reveal hardship and loss, as Bana vividly describes the challenges faced by her family and community.

> From then on, every day it was bombing, bombing, bombing.
> Giant planes would fly across the sky and drop bombs here and
> There, wherever they felt like it. Sometimes a plane flew so low that
> We could see the pilot. Did he know that he was hurting and killing

> People? He must have, but how could he do that? (Alabed, 21)

Amidst the fear, her resilience and hope are evident. Bana's words reveal the collective resilience of a generation that has been robbed of normalcy, yet determined to defy the hopelessness.

> When the war went away, we had hope. Hope is when you feel like
> The world is beautiful and that you can do anything. You feel like you
> Can get through anything bad that happens, because it will be good
> Again soon. So if you have hope, you can still be a little bit happy
> Even if things you don't like are happening, because you know it will
> Get better. When you don't have hope, it's like you are waiting for
> Bad things to happen to you or you think it will always be bad, and
> That actually makes everything feel even worse. So you should
> Always try to have hope (Alabed, 74)

Interwoven with personal narratives are Bana's calls for action and activism. Through her letters, she reaches beyond the confines of her war-torn surroundings, as she implores the world to listen and to act.

> I always talked to my family and friends who left Syria on
> Facebook and WhatsApp and I wanted to tell them what was
> Happening to us—how Yasmin died and my school got bombed.
> Mummy said that there are more people on Twitter than Facebook,
> So I could tell people there. She made me an account so
> we could Send messages (Alabed, 102)

The activism embedded in Dear World extends beyond the individual experience. It is a rallying cry for global awareness and intervention in the Syrian crisis.

Bana Alabed and her role in Digital Activism

Bana Alabed, gained international recognition for her courageous use of digital platforms to share her experiences and voice the plight of civilians in war-torn Aleppo. Born in 2009, Bana took to Twitter, in the heat of the chaos of conflict, to document the harsh realities faced by her and her family. Her tweets, often

accompanied by her mother's translations, provided a poignant and unfiltered glimpse into the daily struggles, fears, and dreams of a child living in the midst of war.

> I wanted to write on Twitter every day to tell people how bad it was In Aleppo and to tell them when I was scared, which was a lot. But it Was also fun to tell the world about nice things too, like when I lost my teeth.
> Mummy would help me figure out what to say in English. We also Took many pictures and videos so the world could see what was Happening in Syria. I was afraid people wouldn't believe us if they didn't see how bad it was, like all the dead bodies and crumbled Buildings. (Alabed, 104)

Bana's use of social media became a powerful form of digital activism, because her voice transcended geographical boundaries to create global awareness about the human cost of war.

Bana Alabed's Strategic Use of Social Media

In *Dear World*, Bana Alabed's Twitter activism stands out as a powerful example of how a marginalized voice can break through global barriers. As a seven-year-old girl living in war-torn Aleppo, Bana used Twitter not only to document her daily reality but also to call for international intervention. Her tweets, such as *"I am very afraid I will die tonight"*, were not just personal cries for help—they became a rallying point for global awareness of the Syrian crisis. Through these direct appeals, Alabed transformed social media into a tool for advocacy, forcing the world to confront the human cost of war.

Her strategic use of storytelling further amplified her activism. Rather than just posting about bombings and airstrikes, Bana personalized the war's impact by sharing intimate moments of her life—playing with her brothers, reading books, and longing for a normal childhood. This form of digital activism humanized the Syrian conflict, challenging the distant, often dehumanized

portrayal of war victims in mainstream media. By centering her own voice, she shifted the narrative from statistics to lived experience, making the plight of Syrian children impossible to ignore. Bana's engagement with global figures also reflects how social media empowers the marginalized. Despite being a young girl from a besieged city, her voice reached world leaders, activists, and celebrities, including Malala Yousafzai and J.K. Rowling. This global recognition exemplifies how digital activism can dismantle traditional power hierarchies, allowing even a child from a war zone to shape international discourse.

Moreover, *Dear World* illustrates how Alabed, as a marginalized girl, reclaimed her agency through social media. The concept of the "subaltern"—historically silenced groups—applies here, as Bana defied the expectation that children, particularly girls, should remain voiceless in war narratives. Her tweets offered an alternative perspective on Syria, countering dominant media portrayals that often overlooked the personal suffering of civilians. By speaking directly to the world, Bana disrupted the passive victim stereotype, asserting herself not just as a survivor but as an active participant in global activism.

Ultimately, *Dear World* demonstrates that digital activism is not just about raising awareness—it is about demanding action. Bana's tweets mobilized support, led to international media coverage, and even contributed to evacuations from Aleppo. Through social media, she did not just tell her story; she used it to push for change.

Impact of Digital Platforms in Activism

Through platforms such as Twitter, Bana Alabed was able to share her experiences and insights directly, unfiltered by traditional media channels. By this, her community was happy to be heard on the global scale.

> Other people from Aleppo said I was helping too. When they saw Me on the street, if I was taking videos or pictures, they would say

> "Thank you, Bana" and "Good for you, Bana," and sometimes they Tweeted to me. We all thought the world had forgotten us, so they Liked that I was telling people not to forget East Aleppo. (Alabed, 105)

Bennett and Segerberg (2) highlight the concept of "connective action," They emphasize how digital tools facilitate decentralized, networked forms of activism. Bana's use of social media aligns with this notion, as her messages travelled far beyond geographical boundaries. It created a network of global awareness around the plight of civilians in conflict zones.

Furthermore, Castells (2015) discusses the idea of the "networked society," emphasizing the pivotal role of communication technologies in influencing contemporary social movements. Bana's digital activism aligns with this framework, illustrating how a single voice, amplified through the digital medium, can resonate across the interconnected networks of the online world, fostering a sense of collective consciousness.

In exploring the impact of Bana Alabed's digital activism, it becomes evident that the digital medium not only enhances the reach of her messages but also intensifies their impact. By directly engaging with a global audience, Bana Alabed draws empathy and understanding.

> We started getting messages right away from grown-ups and Kids all over the world. I couldn't believe that people were listening. And they wrote back such kind things. (Alabed, 102)

This in turn led to the creation of a virtual bridge that connects individuals from diverse backgrounds to a shared cause. The immediacy of her digital communication allows for real-time reactions and responses, creating a dynamic space for dialogue and solidarity.

Conclusion

Investigating Bana Alabed's digital activism has provided insight into the role of girls in online activism. The narrative presented by

Bana serves as a powerful case study. It reveals the ability of young girls to harness the digital platform for social and political change. Throughout the exploration of Bana Alabed's journey, several key findings have emerged. Her digital activism not only enhances the voices of children caught in conflict but also serves as a rallying cry for global awareness and action. The power of her words and images transcends geographical boundaries. It is amazing that a young girl's digital presence can have such an impact in influencing global conversations.

It is also seen that Bana Alabed's digital activism extends beyond her individual experience. It proves the potential for girls worldwide to leverage digital platforms as tools for social change. In the context of contemporary activism and digital communication, this research holds relevance. It prompts a re-evaluation of preconceived notions about who can be an activist and the mediums through which activism can be expressed. The interconnection of girls and digital spaces emerges as a progressive platform for engendering positive social change.

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