

Book Review

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Books Reviewed:

Faith and Feminism in Pakistan: Religious Agency or Secular Autonomy?

By Afiya Zia (Sussex Academic Press, 2018)

The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy by

Ayesha Khan (I. B. Tauris, 2018)

This is a review of two highly significant books, both of which focus on Pakistan. Both books, each in its own way, defend secular human rights in the context of a majority Muslim nation. Zia's book engages in fascinating ways with the theoretical context of post-modern western feminism as well as the working class movements in Pakistan that, she argues, draws on secular concepts rather than the Islamic categories some theorists have attributed to them. Khan's book is a monumental history of the women's movement in Pakistan from 1947 to the present day. Both were published in 2018.

As Zia points out, there is a growing body of literature on 'Islamic Feminism' some of which describes Muslim majority nations from the outside and which adopts a specific standpoint. This literature chastises secular women, in these contexts, for being pro 'western'. Zia engages critically with some of this literature and offers a defence of secular feminism in general as well as providing examples of successes gained by these women.



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There is some overlap between the two books: both outline, for example, the role of WAF (Women's Action Forum). This is a secular, women's rights organisation.

Khan's book, as noted, offers a detailed and comprehensive history of women's activism in Pakistan. It draws on interviews she conducted with women activists covering a long historical period. As she puts it: 'This book is a history of women's struggle for their rights.... before and immediately after the country gained independence from British India...' (Khan, 1). Women from WAF as well as others, she argues, entered into open confrontation with the military regime of Zia-ul-Haq, often putting their lives at risk. They have continued their campaigning ever since.

I would like to set the rest of my remarks in the context of the analysis by Saba Mahmood of women's agency in Muslim contexts.¹ Zia critiques Mahmood in her book.

Mahmood's work, alongside that of others offering related accounts, has generated a huge body of academic literature and it has produced its own field of study that, as Zia points out, even incorporates 'rehabilitated jihadists' (Zia, 37). Zia's and Khan's books offer a comprehensive alternative analysis of women's agency in a Muslim majority nation from that offered by Mahmood.

Mahmood is careful to claim that her work offers an anthropological study of Egypt. However, according to Zia: 'Several studies that have been inspired by this venerated text begin with a customary disclaimer acknowledging and cautioning against reading Mahmood's study of a woman's piety movement in Egypt as a general model of Muslim women's piety. Despite that the majority of anthropological works then reference, borrow, extend and model Mahmood's theory of the docile Muslim female

agent, as an alternative discourse to liberal feminist aspirations in general' (Zia, 38).

In *The Politics of Piety*, Mahmood develops the work of Foucault and Butler. She suggests that it is imperialism that has, partially, produced the liberal, secular autonomous subject of rights. This is then imposed on people who would like to embrace rather different values and particularly Islamism. Mahmood discusses how difficult it is for working women in the mosque movement she investigated to embrace the virtue of 'modesty' in the face of challenges from those who set out to disrupt their practices. She challenges the 'western' conception of agency, which, according to her, denies the weight of custom and tradition.

Mahmood wants to revive a conception of agency that allows that women might choose very differently. This, for her, involves struggle against the secular ethos that permeated their lives and made their realization of piety somewhat difficult. Instead of becoming autonomous subjects of rights, they rather try to become pious Muslims.

In her book, Mahmood offers some specific arguments against the liberal, secular tradition of human rights. She argues that the twin notion of the public/private distinction and the conception of a 'minority' religion exacerbated the position of Coptic Christians in Egypt. The women's piety movement, she argues, forms part of the Islamic revival in the east.

Both Zia and Khan, however, offer a very different picture from that of Mahmood, of a majority Muslim nation. Rather than, as Mahmood claims, feminist women in these Muslim contexts being inspired only by western normative models, instead things are the other way round. *The Politics of Piety*, has, according to Afiya Zia, itself inspired a popularised notion of pietist agency amongst many Muslim women in the post 9/11 period (Zia, 36-59). Some activists, Zia notes, in Pakistan as well as elsewhere 'borrow,

extend and model Mahmood's theory of the docile Muslim female agent as an alternative discourse to liberal feminist aspirations in general' (Zia, 38). According to Mufti, 'the new ethnography of Islam and *The Politics of Piety* is now hugely influential and even canonical in this regard' (12).

Zia notes, quoting another source, that some have argued that there is an invitation, in Mahmood's works, to read 'agency as even substitutive for women's rights' in Muslim contexts.

However, this influence of Mahmood's work is limited and there are also many activists in Pakistan who have always drawn, instead, on human rights.

Zia points to the many contexts in Pakistan where women activists, rather than setting out to be 'docile Muslims' have campaigned against the creeping Islamisation of Pakistan and the imposition upon them of misogynist sharia law. For example, she points out that women activists have organised campaigns for land rights for landless women peasants (Khan and Kirmani, 169). In other words, Mahmood gets things exactly the wrong way round. Instead of her analysis being right, feminist women use human rights discourse to challenge the creeping Islamisation of their country.

As others, including Khan and Kirmani have argued, it is important to move beyond what they see as a false binary, between 'western' rights based discourse and local religious language. No doubt it is the case, they suggest, that the universal language of rights invariably has to be adapted according to context. Yet it remains significant that it is the language of human rights that is used to reject such practices as killing women who have been raped on the grounds that they did not get permission to have sex with the rapist.

Another important point made by Zia is the following: she argues, in the Pakistani context, that it is in part state policy that has contributed to promoting gender segregation and that when the state actively promotes women's professionalization, even in traditional female roles, this has a positive impact upon their levels of autonomy and agency' (Khan 2008). This directly contradicts Mahmood's claim that women wish to challenge the conception of agency associated with the language of human rights

In the Islamisation years of Zia-ul-Haq, Zia argues, women in employment were indeed described as liabilities to Islam. So if their agency is increased by being employed, then the opposite is the case where their abilities to engage in such way are reduced. Moreover, many groups enforced 'religious mores' in that period thus shedding doubt on the idea that the concept of piety was an innocent, if also performative choice, at least in the Pakistani context, of many women

Zia: 'Some of the criticism of liberal/secular feminisms in Muslim majority contexts such as Pakistan, imply that (these) feminists are a non-representative minority, ignorant of the dangers and effects of neo-liberal imperialism and therefore, complicit in imperialist wars/violence. Inadvertently this reads as a form of racialising too- as if, brown women do not have conscious independent agendas but blindly follow the dictates of white feminist agendas (Zia, 135).

Khan's book, *The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy*, like those of Mahmood and Zia, discusses a post-colonial, majority Muslim, country. Unlike Mahmood's women, however, throughout her book, the women celebrated by Khan comprise of a secular, human rights- based minority movement. Unlike Mahmood's women, the WAF in Pakistan (Women's Action Forum), she argues, like Zia, critiqued and opposed the creation and the extreme practices of the Islamisation movement of General Zia-ul-Haq (who ruled Pakistan from

1977-88) and some of his followers. The women wanted to resist such fundamentalist practices as the imposition of sharia law, which, for example, led to the persecution of non-Muslims, through the blasphemy laws. In relation to the distinction much critiqued by Mahmood, the public/private distinction, Khan writes; 'The 1979 policy (of Zia) upheld the division of public/private and gender roles but placed extra emphasis upon women as 'guardians of tradition, culture and morals' in opposition to 'an immoral, threatening and intrusive west.' Women became the markers of "national" morality' (Khan, 129). Women therefore, through the Islamic regimes interpretation of the public/private distinction, were construed as being more unequal than they would be in western contexts. Moreover, in Khan's account, it was not the oppositional Muslim women who celebrated Islam against a regime that deployed concepts from the misguided western human rights discourse, but it was rather the Islamic regimes of Pakistan, and particularly that of Zia-ul-Haq, that set out to inculcate a suspicion of the west (Khan, 172). Indeed, when we get to a later period in Pakistan's history, according to Khan, in 2002, when there was an religious alliance of various 'Muslim' groups, under Musharraf, these groups 'used a rhetoric of "us", a moral community of pious Muslims who followed their interpretation of religion, ritual, dress and distaste of arts and culture, versus "them", a shifting, nebulous group of non-Muslims and/or bad/Muslims' (Khan, 174). This was, ironically but perhaps not surprisingly to those who understand these things, at the same time as the various Islamic parties were 'allies of the Americans.' Indeed, Khan argues that Zia-ul-Haq earlier, had gone so far as to 'infuse' textbooks in schools, 'with a deep suspicion of science and secular knowledge which worked well with a growing distrust of the west and its immorality...' (Khan, 128). Rather than, as with Mahmood, the feminist women rejecting western notions, instead the women's movement in Pakistan challenged (bravely and in ways that were often at extreme risk to themselves) the Islamisation of Pakistan which warned them to 'beware the pernicious influences abroad' (Khan, 129). This became more difficult for them under

Musharraf. His alliance of Muslim groups, including the majority group Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam, whose *madrasas* had trained the Taliban, instituted such measures as 'blackening out women's faces on billboards', 'banning male doctors and technicians from performing ultrasounds on women' and, 'in some areas, banning women from working in public call offices because they aroused immoral urges in men who saw them' (Khan, 175). Indeed, Khan points out that it was particularly difficult for them during the 'reign' of Musharraf whose 'fundamentalism' (my word) was less apparent than that of Zia. On one occasion, Musharraf was under pressure from the US to reign in the Taliban and Al Qaeda. One way in which he attempted to do this was to streamline the *madrassas* that Musharraf believed were fermenting intolerance. So the army killed the insurgents and broke up their secret tunnels. But the *madrassas* fought back, sometimes using women and children as shields. Clearly there was sympathy within Pakistan for the militias in the *madrassas* fighting the army. But WAF had to remind people of what had been happening in the madrasa where children had been taught anti state ideology and had given them military training (Khan, 183-8).

This review can only touch the surface of these two books, but it is to be hoped that they will begin the process of creating a counter-narrative to that of Mahmood, one that actually enables all us, all over the world, to celebrate the courage and the resilience of the women activists in Pakistan who use the language of human rights to oppose the creeping 'Islamisation' of their nation. It is also to be hoped that this narrative will, just like that of Mahmood, extend beyond the domain of studies of Pakistan, to a more general context, as it deserves to be.

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To cite this article:

Assiter, A. (2020) 'Book Review', *Feminist Dissent*, (5), 320-327. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n5.2020.774>

Notes

¹ I give a much more detailed critique of Saba Mahmood's work in my forthcoming book *New Materialism and New Defence of Human Rights*, Rowman and Littlefield forthcoming, 2020-2021.