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Taimur Rahman

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Siren Song¹

Reviewed by Taimur Rahman²

The title of this book is extremely misleading. This is not a book about siren songs. Or perhaps it is, but not in the way you think. The book draws you in, dressed as a biography of prominent Pakistani female singers. And then, you find yourself trapped into a complex discussion of post-colonial philosophy stretching across time (in terms of philosophy) and space (in terms of continents). Hence, any review of this book cannot be a simple retelling of its contents but begs the reader to engage in some seriously strenuous thinking. I begin my review, therefore, not with what is in, but with what is *not* in the book - the debate that shapes the book, and to which this book is a stimulating response.

While Marxists and post-modernists differ entirely on epistemic, ontological, and political levels, there is an agreement from Gramsci to Terry Eagleton that modern forms of control and discipline are qualitatively different from medieval or even early modern times.

The former, called sovereign power by Foucault, relied purely on physical violence. The latter relies on power not as a negative force but as a productive and positive force that defines, limits, controls, and delineates the realm of epistemic possibility.

Within feminism this idea has generated a rich debate between those, such as Judith Butler who argue that the emancipatory project requires the destruction of any universal subject, to Nancy Fraser, who argues that emancipation cannot exist without a subject, beyond the individual, requiring emancipation (Fraser 1989: 29). As Nancy Hartsock put it, "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?" (Hartsock 1990: 164).

And while my own views are much closer to the latter, the commonality between them rests in the view that hegemony today, including patriarchal hegemony, is no longer, or perhaps never was, purely applied, protected, or secured with force or violence.

Dr. Fawzia's book addresses the defining characteristics and contradictions of the complex identities of artist, Muslim, working class. She presents a story of how the subaltern have mediated through the matrix of power, knowledge, or Foucault's biopower: The axis of Islam and Hinduism, patriarchy and femininity, high and low culture, class and nationalism and finally, the chador and honour.

This work is not important because it highlights some of the great women artists of Pakistan. That would have been contribution enough. It is important because it situates the agency of these artists in the larger debates within feminism and also within social sciences in general. Contesting with the valorisation of the conservative project, that is apparent in the work of Talal Asad and Saba Mehmood, and still largely within the framework of the progressive tradition, Dr. Fawzia's book is perhaps the first attempt to bridge two apparently different worlds in Western academia and the music of Pakistan as articulated by its leading female artists.

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² Associate Professor, Political Science Humanities and Social Sciences, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). taimur@lums.edu.pk

This is a complex intellectual discussion - one that requires time and perhaps even several readings to fully absorb. At this first reading I can only offer a few scattered observations. The arc of the book travels from Malika Pukhraj all the way to the corporate backed sound of Coke Studio.

The first chapter is about Malika Pukhraj who started her career at the age of nine as a courtesan in the court of Maharaja Hari Singh of Kashmir. Through her life's journey we see how the association of the classical tradition of music and poetry with the courtesan culture allowed for the patronage necessary for its development but also ultimately, proved to be its Achilles' heel. The criticism of Hindu nationalists that this courtesan culture represented the decadence of the Muslim elite resulted in the near wholesale abandonment of this world of music and art.

Pukhraj's life story captures the tensions and contradictions of the closing of the public sphere for women and the restriction of the development of women artists only within that culture. That the arts could mainly develop in the courtesan culture is a condemnation not of the courtesans but of patriarchy that only allowed women to develop and explore these talents if they were outside the pale of "respectable society". The courtesan, though tainted by association with sex-work was also the purveyor, within the Urdu public-literary tradition, of cultural authenticity. And as for the fate of these singers themselves, whom Afzal-Khan describes as "queer style performer" in the tradition of the gharana and tawaif, one is reminded of a passage by Engels regarding ancient Athens. He writes in *The Origins of the Family* (1884, Ch 2, Para 4):

The man had his athletics and his public business, from which women were barred; in addition, he often had female slaves at his disposal and during the most flourishing days of Athens an extensive system of prostitution which the state at least favoured. It was precisely through this system of prostitution that the only Greek women of personality were able to develop, and to acquire that intellectual and artistic culture by which they stand out as high above the general level of classical womanhood as the Spartan women by their qualities of character. But that a woman had to be a hetaira before she could be a woman is the worst condemnation of the Athenian family.

From this pre-partition period we cover the life of Roshanara Begum. Unlike Malika Pukhraj, who had a very supportive husband, the book reveals how the career of Roshanara Begum died a slow death in the newly independent Pakistan as a consequence of bourgeois respectability. As the wife of a civil servant she was very mindful that her work as a performer should not taint her husband's image or career. Ultimately, the need for bourgeois respectability extinguished a great talent.

Next the book examines three very different performers: Noor Jehan, Abida Parveen and Deeyah. The chapter makes the case that the popular success of these three unconventional performers led to the "queering of Islam". The first was publicly unfaithful and yet adored by millions. The second was blurred gender identification. And the third challenged conventional Islamic women's modesty by baring her body. While Noor Jehan and Abida Parveen are known across Pakistan, I was a bit surprised by the inclusion of Deeyah who has not really had any significant impact on the music and culture of Pakistan.

The next chapter examines the life of Reshma, a gypsy singer. If the previous singers challenged gender conventions, Reshma challenged the conventions of class. In this discussion, the traditions of folk music and poetry are counterposed to the high literary tradition of progressive

writers such as, Kishwar Naheed. Naheed, a rebel Marxist and feminist poetess in her own right, comes off as rather unflattering in relation to Reshma. However, in my view the point is overstated because it neglects that while Naheed may have utilised the classical form in her poetry, her work, for example, *Hum Gunahgar Auratain (We Sinful Women)* is considered correctly iconic in challenging class and patriarchy.

In Chapter Five, Afzal-Khan examines the phenomenal rise of Nazia Hassan and her brother Zohaib Hassan during the Islamic military dictatorship of Zia ul Haq. When the duo was shown on Pakistan Television, the producers were told to film Nazia from the waist up so that her dancing feet would not be visible to audiences. This is reminiscent of how U.S. television treated the young Elvis Presley in the 1950s. Nazia's pop music, massively popular in both India and Pakistan, was perceived by the classical cultural elite as entertainment rather than serious music. To gain respectability Nazia and her family made it a point to emphasise that the duo had given away to charity all the money they made from music.

The contradiction between music and respectability with its origins in the courtesan culture casts a long shadow over all music in post-colonial Pakistan. The attempt by various women performers to negotiate this contradiction of respectability while staying true to their art is undertaken by utilising, as Lorde says, the "master's tools to dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 2018). However, as discussed in the book, this is not a strategy without its own pitfalls and risks. In fact, Foucault would say it is merely a form of the normalisation of discipline and is also fraught with many self-contradictions.

These contradictions, in my opinion, are raised but not resolved by Dr. Fawzia, especially in her last chapter on Coke Studio. Although I was surprised that the book didn't critique the pompous main slogan of Coke Studio as the "Sound of the Nation", I nonetheless agreed with her nuanced view that both critiqued the corporatisation of art and feminism, and its clear class overtones. I also appreciated the continuing relevance of performance potentialities created by that space. The arc of the book, therefore, in my view follows the arc of the historical movement from medieval to modern forms of hegemony.

The more things change, the more they remain the same. While something is gained from seeking respectability, something of the authentic (in the Hiedeggerian sense of the term) is lost along the way. What makes, I ask you, Abida Parveen's refusal to wear a chador, putting it down on stage in the Zia era so genuine, organic, real, and pregnant with possibilities of resistance? One doesn't have to write long verbose essays to explain the gravitas of that moment. In contrast, when one speaks of Coke studio as resistance to fundamentalism, one must belabour the point while cursing the dogmatic-obstinacy of the reader. Why does the latter feel contrived, counterfeit and imposed, like a forgery? If I were to express my opinion without any "lagi lipti", to use a punjabi phrase, I would have to agree with Marx's paraphrasing of Hegel that history repeats itself, "first as tragedy, then as farce." (Marx, 1852).

In conclusion, despite my criticism of some details, *Siren Song* is a splendid work that helps to situate the history, struggle, and art of female performers in Pakistan in the larger context of feminist theory. In fact, although there have been many works written on the life and struggle of female performers in Pakistan, and while one can extract from these works the various obstacles, contradictions, loopholes and biases that women faced in developing their careers and their art, *Siren Songs* is perhaps the only work in which these complexities are explored through the theoretical prism of modern feminist theory. For that reason the book serves the invaluable purpose of connecting feminist academia with Pakistani female performance art.

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