

Book Review

Sadaf Ahmad. *Pakistani Women: Multiple Locations and Competing Narratives*.

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Ahmad's edited volume on Pakistani women captures the multiplicity of their locations and the diversity of their voices, thus filling a longstanding gap about Pakistani women's lived experiences and their ambivalent positioning within the contemporary Pakistani society. In her introductory chapter Ahmad mentions the monolithic or simplistic misrepresentation of Muslim (Pakistani) women by Western feminists as powerless, which, she argues, is closely linked to lack of representation of Pakistani women at the international fora. Most of the sociological and anthropological research on Pakistani women has appeared on the international horizons only during the last decade. The invisibility of Pakistani women was further compounded by their misrepresentation as passive, veiled and victimized. In the final chapter of the volume, elaborating on her own work on Pakistani women, Haeri raises a fundamental question: why do Muslim women like herself who have carved a niche for themselves in their respective societies and around the globe, never get represented in the Western media and research? The answers are partially articulated through the myriad voices, narratives and positionalities of the Pakistani women represented in this volume.

The edited volume is a compilation of research on Pakistani women conducted by female researchers who come from a wide array of disciplines such as law, anthropology, sociology, women studies. The researchers are also diverse in terms of their geographical locations being based in Pakistan, Canada, United States: some like Shahla Haeri are of Iranian origin, live and work in the United States and research on Pakistani women.

The common thread running through all the chapters in this volume is the representation of Pakistani women in and through their own narratives. To achieve this objective, a host of anthropological and social science research methods (fieldwork, interviews, archives, participant observation, statistical data) have been used by the researchers to describe and analyse the lives of women in prisons, in remote villages of KPK province, in rural belts in Sindh and Punjab, and in urban centres capturing a rich and diverse repertoire of cultural norms and practices, ethno-linguistic and class trajectories. The book has ten chapters in all—five of which have been published before—which cover a wide range of sociological, political, religious and legal themes with regard to women's social and familial roles within Pakistan. A few chapters like Shahnaz Khan's chapter on the *Zina* Ordinance are devoted to the imposition of Hudood Ordinance and *Zina* Ordinance during the Zia regime as a way of exercising control over women's sexuality in terms of choice of marriage partner. She illustrates—through interviews with men who favour these laws and seem indifferent to women's suffering in prisons owing to false accusations of adultery—how the civil society in today's Pakistan is divided on this crucial legislation. Further, Khan observes that by focusing on the fundamentals

of Islam, according to Zia's *zina* (illicit sex) ordinance, illicit sex became a crime against the state for the first time in Pakistan's history. Her research in Pakistani prisons shows how women's incarceration for *zina* is linked to issues of gender, class and control of women's bodies.

Similarly, Jamal's chapter titled: 'Gender, Citizenship and the Nation-state in Pakistan: Willful Daughters or Free Citizens?' elaborates how the Pakistani state controls female sexuality through the institution of patriarchal family, by assigning women the primary roles of mothers, daughters, wives and sisters thus reducing their equal rights to Pakistani citizenship.

She further strengthens her argument through a detailed discussion of Saima Waheed's case who married against the wishes of her family, which was taken as a violation of the sanctity of the institution Pakistani family by the judges, challenging the authority of her father and thereby subverting the institution of the patriarchal family. Jamal and Khan both throw light on the detrimental impact of patriarchal legislation on their research participant's lives. Similar research is also needed on women accused and imprisoned under blasphemy laws in Pakistan as the law is being excessively used to implicate religious minorities and/or innocent people for personal vendettas. The issue has emerged in the news as there has been an uproar in the Islamic Ideology Council and the National Assembly recently regarding amendments in the existing laws.

Saigol's 'Partition of the Self' takes up the issue of ethno-linguistic identity of Urdu-speaking settlers in Karachi, who unlike other ethnic groups have no regional base in Pakistan. Identity--as it emerges in Mohajir women's interview narratives-- illustrates how ethnic and linguistic issues in Pakistan are tied in to the political: how people are subjected to marginalization based on their ethnic and linguistic identity. Saigol argues that even within the political meetings of Mohajir Movement (now the Muttahida Qaumi Movement) control over women is exercised through regulation of their bodies. Hence, the politicization of women via the ethnic struggle is not meant to challenge the norms of patriarchy. Traditional forms of morality are imposed while women are mobilized for political work, thus rendering the ethnic movement simultaneously liberating and constraining for women.

Similarly, approaching the representations of Pakistani women from the theoretical lens of intersectionality, the research in different contexts and arenas illustrates a common feature across the board: that intersections of gender and poor economic background compound women's problems; issues of violence and exploitation of women are rampant among the lower income groups; illiteracy further aggravates these issues as illiterate and poor women tend to internalize the patriarchal norms and ideologies. Both Weiss and Saeed's articles illustrate how women from very poor and uneducated backgrounds shy away from public acknowledgement of their profession because women's work itself is considered to be a social stigma. Weiss's research takes up the issue of the gendered division of Muslim space by highlighting the work of skilled women workers within the confines of their homes in the walled city of Lahore. Saeed's vignettes into the lives of women who worked in the Pakistani theatre industry highlight the stigmatized nature of their profession and existence: a theme she has pursued since the publication of her groundbreaking book *Taboo* in 2002, which is an ethnographic study of the red light area in Lahore; where many of our female film celebrities hail from.

However, notwithstanding its breadth in representing a diversity of voices, and its contribution to enhancing our understanding of Pakistani women's multifarious identities, such research still largely remains the prerogative of elitist women or First World academics, using Western models and frameworks to understand the complexities of the lives of Third World Women (Mohanty 1988). The women academics whose research is showcased in this collection are all (with one or two exceptions) based in the West. While HEC in Pakistan is promoting and funding research in higher education, why are all the indigenous women academics still invisible in such edited volumes? Are the (wo)men academics in Pakistan indifferent to or oblivious of these pressing issues or the research on *us* is valuable and validated if it is carried out by *them* i.e. academics supported by the Western academy and research paradigms. Although this volume adds to our existing knowledge about Pakistani women by making them visible to the world, however, research findings can be made more useful and relevant to women's lives if fed into the governmental policies and legislation to ameliorate women's vulnerable positioning within the patriarchal structures of Pakistani society.

Overall, the research reported in this collection suggests that women's public and political roles are almost non-existent, and although women are politically and socially active, they continue to remain invisible in the public domains due to the lack of education, societal and familial and legal structures and strictures. As the volume brings forth Pakistani women's narratives, it makes a valuable contribution in making hitherto invisible Pakistani women visible in international research, and should be hailed and read by academics, scholars and practitioners engaged with South Asian Studies, Women Studies, Muslim Societies, Sociology, Anthropology, Law and Language Studies.

