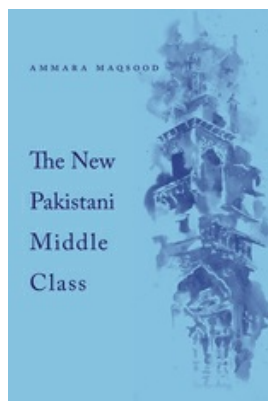


Book Review: The New Pakistani Middle Class by Ammara Maqsood

The book unveils multiple facets of the country's middle class, its trajectory since Pakistan's creation and its understanding of and experience with the concept of a modern progressive nation and religion. Hina Shaikh reviews Dr Ammara Maqsood's ethnographic debut.



Pakistan has a rising middle class, now a critical segment of the country's population, exhibiting great variation in its political, social and even economic positioning. There is, however, lack of sound socio-scientific research and literature on the evolution of this segment of the population. There are, of course, certain generalisations such as the middle class is mostly urban and a big consumer group belonging to a certain income threshold. However, the middle class is mostly dealt with in the economic or political context i.e. how this growing segment of the population impacts the economic or political landscape.

Dr Ammara Maqsood's ethnographic debut *The Pakistan's New Middle Class* unveils multiple facets of the country's middle class, its trajectory since Pakistan's creation and its understanding of and experience with the concept of a modern progressive nation. Her work focuses on how Pakistan's rising urban middle class engage with religion (Islam) and its image as a progressive nation.

The New Pakistani Middle Class by Ammara Maqsood. Harvard University Press. For purchasing details [click here](#).

While providing a fresh way of understanding the middle class, the book examines the Muslim middle class in the postcolonial South Asian context and traces the evolution of this class from the late 18th century India. While the ethnography is specific to Lahore, Dr Maqsood discloses several emerging trends common across South Asia. For example, her comparison of the shift towards personal piety amongst Pakistan's new middle class to reformism in Kerala, where middle class Muslims associate religious reformism

with a modern outlook through promotion of education. Dr Maqsood feels such trends should be understood as a global impulse to cleanse rather than conform to a certain school of thought. Hence, there is a persistent shift in the new middle class to certain kinds of practices, across various sects of Islam – Deobandi, Wahabi and Bareilvi — lacking a clear direction but up for constant negotiation.

The account is highly contextualised and relevant (especially to those in the Indian sub-continent) to the current narrative around the search for a collective Muslim identity in modern progressive times. Though set in Lahore, her findings are frequently extended, and convincingly so, to the rest of urban Pakistan. The author also consistently provides references to relevant experiences from several other parts of the Muslim world. For example, Dr Maqsood gives examples from West Asia, Iran and India, about growth in Islamic consumerism — especially during Ramzan — and the increasing popularity of religious study circles. The book can thus appeal to most readers trying to understand how the Muslim middle class belonging to any part of the globe struggles to situate itself in today's world.

The author's central inquiry is around the question of how the country's new middle class perceives itself both as a Pakistani and as a member of the larger global community. In that process, Dr Maqsood closely studies the connection and contrast between the old (established) and the new (upwardly mobile) middle class. While both groups are similar in their yearning for modernity and a progressive Pakistan, they differ in the perception the same. This contrast is an important contribution of this book as it provides a diligent understanding of the evolution of post-colonial Muslim societies, addressing the issue of class within the urban milieu.



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The first chapter untangles the concept of modernity constructed amongst the old established middle class in the post-independence era. This works beautifully in creating an understanding of the fascination with a Pakistan of the 1960s. The second chapter dissects the relationship between the old and new middle class; the fixation with piety amongst the new middle class and its interaction with religion is an important focus. Linked to the previous chapter, the third one discusses the emerging popularity of Quran schools and short religious courses in pursuit of a more informed and individualised understanding of Islam. The last chapter examines the recent rise in Islamic consumerism and how that connects with the desire by a Muslim in a global world for modernity. The discussion particularly highlights the challenges people face in defining themselves to a global audience.

Over time and across these types of middle classes, ideals of modernity are updated and the author navigates the reader articulately through these changing perceptions. The old middle class longs for a time when Pakistan held a more favourable global image, prior to General Zia's islamisation while the new middle class asserts its modern status through its connections to the West and a global Muslim population. The new class is often viewed by the old one as backward, linking the new middle class to the recent outburst in religious violence. The new middle class tries to challenge this perception and rationalise religion by emphasising the relevance of Islam in everyday life and in modern science.

While the distinction between established and new middle class can get foggy, the reader walks away with a very clear understanding of not only the distinguishing characteristics of each type of middle class but also the factors – such as rise of religious extremism, a new generation of urban population, emergence of a global economy — that have reshaped the status quo.

Fundamentally linked to the distinction between the old and new middle class, is the assumption about their national identity and uneasiness with religion. In Ayub Khan's time, Pakistan was involved in a post-colonial programme of modernisation, reflected in multiple ways – such as in the design of national buildings and in Ava Gardner's trip to Lahore – where the urban public sphere was defined by a certain mannerism and decorum. On comparing Turkey to Pakistan and Ayub Khan's policies to Kemal Ataturk's, the author makes it clear that while Ataturk separated religion and state, Khan imagined a modern progressive Pakistan rooted in Islam. Yet the established middle class yearns for a Pakistan where the role of religion is minimal while the new one wishes to internalise Islam as part of daily life. Inherent in the nostalgia for the Pakistan of the 1950s and 60s is a dislike for the new middle class' definition of modernity that shows visible symbols of religiosity.

Her account of middle class households traverses through multiple layers — the need to appeal to an assumed global audience, the evolving understanding of modernity, and the desire to integrate religion into an everyday progressive life across the different classes. The reader is unlikely to actively be thinking about these and their implication in the manner presented by Dr. Maqsood.

Dr Maqsood writes that even as the new middle class continues its struggle to find the right balance between religion and modernity, in a post 9/11 era it has an intrinsic need to understand and own religion as it challenges the stereotypes. Apart from being part of a difficult global political environment faced by Muslims all across the world, the new middle class also confronts additional challenges — a fast growing population, ill-planned urbanisation, lack of productive employment opportunities and so on – that add to their struggle to survive and at the same time maintain a certain reputation to a global audience.

The new middle class has linked the survival of its identity as a progressive cohort to generating sound ties with the larger Muslim community. The author articulates this well by providing examples from today's urban Pakistan. A growing Islamic consumer market, increasing use of the veil/abaya and sudden rise in number of Quran schools and religious study circles are some manifestations of the desire to create this link. While the old middle class is also trying to appeal to the same global audience, it is instead focusing on re-creating the Pakistan of the 1950s and 60s.

The narrative is relatable also because it focuses on the same ideals that typically drive economic growth – urbanisation, demographic changes, immigration, a reverse-brain drain, capitalism/consumerism and free media – amongst the Muslim diaspora. Other [writers](#) have also linked the success of capitalism in the Muslim world to an upwardly mobile middle class in West Asia, including Pakistan where the author argues that attitudes of this new middle class are both pious and materialistic, focusing on the interplay between Islam and economics.

In her work, class appears as an important marker of the urban population, which views itself in relation to each other and to the outside world. Since the middle class displays certain socioeconomic as well as demographic traits, it cannot be entirely linked to an individual's income, expenditure, or wealth. The few existing works such as [New Politics of the Middle Class; Estimating the Middle Class in Pakistan; New Islamic Schools Tradition, Modernity and Class in Urban Pakistan](#), are focussed mainly on estimating the size or dynamics of this class in the political or social context for urban or demographic planning. It is refreshing to see an objective, well-researched analysis of this segment of the country's population and of how this segment perceives itself within the local and global context. Dr Maqsood looks at the varying identities of the middle class that can help us understand how this can determine the trajectory of politics and economics in Pakistan as it intersects with the rise of religious tendencies amongst the Muslim society.

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About The Author



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