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CHAPTER 16

The Fundamentalist Nexus of Neoliberalism, Rentier Capitalism, Religious and Secular Patriarchies, and South Asian Feminist Resistances

Fawzia Afzal-Khan¹

ABSTRACT

In two case studies from Pakistan, which I then link to Afghanistan (under the Taliban before and after the Soviet/US proxy war there) as well as the Farmer's Movement in India—I wish to proffer an intersectional analysis of debates around the issue of women's rights in the global south. Feminist activism (art-as-activism), can help build solidarities to mount resistances against globally-inflected state repression in our age of neoliberal economic and religious fundamentalisms, which, working in tandem, seek to roll back the rights of women and minorities in and across South Asia, as elsewhere.

Keywords: neoliberalism, rentier capitalism, neocolonialism, imperialism, fundamentalism, activism, women's resistance, solidarity, black feminism

Brief Overview of Neoliberal Economic Fundamentalism and its(neo)colonial underpinnings

Many social scientific analyses of the global economy ... are ... willfully indifferent to... colonialism...[and] they ignore categories of gender and sexuality as integral to developing an intersectional analysis and understanding of our shared worlds.

(Zophia Edwards, Monthly Review²)

In 1993, in a series of interviews with David Barsamian, Noam Chomsky traced the “the new global economy” of neoliberalism, back to Richard Nixon's dismantling of the Bretton Woods system in 1971, which, as he cogently argued,

led to a deregulation of currencies, and which together with other changes, expanded the amount of unregulated capital in the world that accelerated the globalization or internationalization of the economy. It was a way to restore and continue US global dominance in finance, by increasing corporate profits through exporting jobs to low-wage areas of the world: the so called third world.³

This process, in turn, has also brought the “third world” home to Euro-America—by creating a two-tiered society of the extremely wealthy and privileged (white), and the extremely impoverished, often “superfluous” segment of the population (largely of color), with their expendable jobs, dubbed the “precariat”—members of what has been called the “gig” economy. Gutting of the social welfare net “at home” in western capitalist nations, and through structural adjustment programs (SAPS) abroad, neoliberal economic fundamentalism has led to the same deligitimation of “big” government at home in the US and Europe, and in the global south nations via its multinational corporations operating in “free trade” zones that protect the capital investments of the West by imposing austerity measures on developing nations as a prerequisite for high-interest “aid” packages delivered by western lending agencies such as the World Bank, IMF, and their trade agreements with ruling elites of global south nations such as GATT, NAFTA, and so on.

British economist Guy Standing, discussing the key themes from his book *The Corruption of Capitalism: Why Rentiers Thrive and Work Does Not Pay* in 2017, points out the corruption engendered by this neocolonial system of global governance, in what he names a system of “Rentier Capitalism”:

There is a lie at the heart of global capitalism. Politicians, financiers, and global bureaucrats claim to believe in free, competitive markets, but have constructed the most unfree market system ever made. It is corrupt because income is channeled to the owners of property—financial, physical and intellectual—at the expense of society. ⁴

This book reveals how global capitalism is rigged in favor of what Standing calls “rentiers” (i.e. global elites/owners of capital), to the detriment of all of us, especially the precariat. A plutocracy and elite enrich itself, not through production of goods and services, but through ownership of assets, including intellectual property, aided by subsidies, tax breaks⁵, debt mechanisms, revolving doors between politics and business, and the privatization of public services. Rentier capitalism is entrenched by the corruption of democracy, manipulated by the plutocracy and an elite-dominated media.

Feminist Artist Interventions in South Asia

As a schol-art-ivist who has focused her work on a transnational feminism of the 99%⁶—I have always been alert and committed to learning and teaching a form of feminist theory and activism (through theatre and performance/gender performativities and performance in the global south, specifically Pakistani street theatre, and more recently, via study of land rights movements in Pakistan and India)—that is NOT about women “breaking the glass ceiling.”⁷ This is a counter-feminism to the “lean-in” variety preached by the likes of Sheryl Sandberg—who have popularized “individual empowerment” scripts that seem to be the most easily under-

stood and popular forms of feminism here (arising out of liberal white feminist theory). Most of my students come in to my classes attached these “individual empowerment” scripts and my job as I see it, is to shift that perspective.

Because when we start paying attention to issues in the US such as unaffordable housing, poverty wages, inadequate health care, border policing, climate change which are coming to the fore of our collective consciousness now thanks to COVID—we see how these are actually issues that arise out of the phenomena of neoliberal capitalism that has the entire world, north and south, firmly in its grip. Such a vice-like grip of neoliberal capitalist oppression is visibilized clearly when we see people from the global south including pregnant women and children from Central and Latin American countries willing to brace the risks of trying to get to USA borders looking for asylum from the depredations unleashed by such a corrupt system. We now understand more clearly that they are fleeing the consequences of this neoliberal system that that benefits corporate America, but has worsened poverty, access to education and jobs, affordable child and healthcare in their home countries, thanks to the privatization doctrine the US and its lending agencies (World Bank, IMF) force governments in these countries to follow, which has led to the gutting of the welfare state. We see that same logic at work in our own country here in the USA, affecting our own internally marginalized populations in the same way.

Rentier Capitalism is Fostering Revolt: Case Study# 1, Activism through the Alternative or Parallel Theatre Movement and the Women’s Movement in Pakistan, 1980s-Present

In my scholarly work—citing one example—I wrote about a play written and performed by Ajoka Theatre of Pakistan—where the plot exposes the convergence of neoliberal capitalism (linked to Klein’s “disaster/vulture” capitalism⁸)—with patriarchal repression and the rise of “Islamic fundamentalism” in Pakistan—and how theatre activism—artivism—especially around women’s and minorities’ rights issues, became a form of resistance in the face of fear and repression that such a dangerous nexus of forces/phenomena has resulted in. I have referred elsewhere to this convergence of forces as “the unholy alliance of [neoliberal or] postmodern capitalism, patriarchy and fundamentalism”⁹, by which I mean both the economic fundamentalism practiced by the imperialist US and its acolytes, as well as the Islamist fundamentalism that such neoliberal ideology and practices has engendered as a regressive reaction.

The play in question, entitled *Dukhini (Suffering Woman)* by the *Ajoka* Theater Group, brings these issues (one of them being proprietorship over women’s bodies-in the name of religion- exacerbated under neoliberal or postmodern capitalism), to light through the theme of the trafficking of women, who are smuggled from poverty-stricken Bangladesh, across India, and into Pakistan under the false promise of a “better life,” only to find themselves sold into prostitution to the highest bidder.

These women become victims not only of some sort of “Muslim fundamentalist religious patriarchy,” but also of a capitalist consumerist ideology unleashed by a neoliberal economic “fundamentalism” that treats women’s bodies as commodities to be bought and sold in the market-place. Thus, the Islamist/traditionalist/patriarchal ideologies that work to keep these trafficked women oppressed by convincing them of their “fallen nature,” (they cannot “go back” to families, for instance, because of the ‘dishonor’ associated with being trafficked in the sex trade), work in tandem with/feed into, globalized neoliberal/rentier capitalism, linked to European colonialism of yesterday, and its cousin US imperialism of today. Indeed, the colonialist interventions of yesteryear that link to the imperial hegemonic nexus of our times represented during the Cold War by the US and USSR power blocs, the reigns of which today are held solely by the USA and its western/NATO allies (chief among them the biggest colonial power of its day, Great Britain) in our unipolar world—this colonial-imperial nexus has boosted the rise of regressive Islamist movements everywhere.



Figure 1: Poster of Ajoka’s play, *Dukhini*

Dukhini is a play that exposes what I call, this unholy alliance of fundamentalisms. Agnes Khoo, a labor activist and researcher of South and South-East Asia underscores the ways in which a strengthening of patriarchy (in its so-called Islamist variant in Pakistan), feeds into and upholds the neoliberal (colonial/imperial) economic model that rules our world today. She writes,

the re-structured economies in most parts of Asia have resulted in a permanent pool of no small number of reserve labour force, the majority of whom are women. This reserve labour pool will ensure that labour cost is kept the lowest, at all times, in favour of International Capitalist Production and Capital Accumulation. Thus, in this new millenium, labour, especially women's labour, will be kept insecure, unprotected and flexible... creat[ing], ultimately, a class of impoverished, 'globalized' workers that are not protected by their State nor by the governments in the countries/areas where they are working.¹⁰

This statelessness of migrant labor—particularly involving women's labor (including sex labor) in a Neoliberal Globalized Unipolar New World Order—serves the needs both of imperialist capitalism, as well as of the militarized postcolonial third-world state, dependent on imperialist aid for its own legitimization—all at the expense of a democratic and secular polity. In turn, in order to secure legitimacy for its own illegitimate seizure of power and suspension of democratic civilian rule, the past two military dictatorships in Pakistan (in the 1980s, and again the 2000s), have strengthened the military-mullah alliance¹¹. Thus, the women sold into sexual slavery, such as the protagonists of *Dukhini*, become victims also of the Zina Ordinance passed by Gen. Zia's regime into Law back in 1980s, when he was simultaneously the CIA's darling and heavily funded by the US state dept as well as the Saudi government, to create religious madrassahs that could become breeding grounds for jihad-ists to fight against the Soviet Union in neighboring Afghanistan.

The Deadly Nexus and Women's Oppression in/as the Precariat Class. Activism's Positive Effects

This same ideology of globalized neoliberalism, that works in tandem with the military-mullah nexus in countries like Pakistan, shapes the experiences of victimization of the trafficked women of the Pakistani play, *Dukhini*. For example, when one of the women in the play *Dukhini*, refuses to leave the gravesite she visits in Karachi regularly (to pay her respects to a woman like herself who rebelled by immolating herself in a public square in Karachi)—in order to service a client, her pimp arrives to threaten her in no uncertain terms that he has the military state's Law on his side, and therefore she must comply with his commands. That is, if she refuses to listen to him, he will bring a policeman to the scene and get her booked under the Hudood Ordinance—specifically, the law of “zina” passed by General Zia's government in the late 70's according to which a single woman, could, with impunity, be labelled a “whore” or an “adulteress” by her husband or even an unrelated man—and because of the law of Evidence (also passed under the Hudood Ordinance), according to which her testimony is regarded as equal to only half of a man's—she would be unable to prove her innocence, and therefore be automatically thrown into jail, there to be further abused by male police officers and wardens.

What is important to note here is that “militablist establishments” such as that of General Zia, and others like the one that was headed by another army general, Pervez Musharraf who declared Martial Law in 1999 and then ruled as President from 2000-2008, either passed or went along with the pursuit of anti-women’s and minority rights agendas. Despite such contraventions of human rights and democratic rights, these illegitimate governments were aided and abetted by US imperialist forces and their neoliberal economic policies, under the guise of a seemingly benign discourse of globalization.

Even civilian elected governments (such as the Pakistan Tehrik Insaf (Pakistan Justice Movement) government in power today led by former cricketer Imran Khan), is controlled and beholden to the power behind the throne—the Pakistan Army, which, which, as the de facto state, continues to follow the diktat of the IMF, World Bank and other multinational corporations. These agencies acting on behalf of international capital, force the governments of countries like Pakistan to enact structural adjustment programs that take money away from public services and funnel them into private hands/private industry. At the same time, such governments have strengthened the power of religious extremist parties in order to maintain legitimacy of their martial as well as civilian-backed regimes in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, by claiming the support of religious leaders.

Despite the chokehold of this nexus of forces on the lives of ordinary citizens, thanks to the theatre activism promoted by plays such as *Dukhini* that surely aided women’s rights lobbyists in their fight against the military state-mandated draconian laws against women,¹² the next military dictator of Pakistan, General Musharraf (1999-2008), under pressure by civil society/women’s rights/feminist groups such as WAF (The Women’s Action Forum), was forced to pass the Women’s Protection Bill in November 2006.¹³

The annual women’s rights marches that have been organized across major urban centers in Pakistan since 2018, called Aurat March, (*aurat* means woman in Urdu), have carried on the tradition of resistance against continuing repression and anti-women legislation. Protesting citizens enact their iterative (i.e., performative) demands as cultural activists, for many different rights that are taken up during these events, when thousands of women and their male supporters, as well as transgender activists, labor rights activists and so on, take to the streets every March 8, despite threats of bodily harm and accusations of being western stooges levelled against them by members of various extremist groups, including state-sponsored ones.¹⁴

Even a cursory glance at some of the demands carried on placards and repeated as chants and performed through skits on the streets during these marches, demonstrate how these activists point to the nexus of forces I have been alluding to in this paper. For instance, the Aurat March in Lahore described the 2021 rallies as a protest against the “patriarchy pandemic,” in which they linked domestic violence with sexual harassment in the workplace (connecting private with public space), and injustice toward women in these interlinked spheres, with lack of a robust welfare state that is needed to protect the health and safety of ALL its citizens. Thus,

protesters held signs and shouted out demands for an increase in the health care allocation in the following year's fiscal budget, as well as demanding transparency on how this increase would reach women and transgender communities. They also called for access to Covid vaccination regardless of gender or ethnic background, and, importantly, for putting an end to privatization of the health care system.¹⁵



Figure 2: Aurat March 2021

Case Study #2: Okara Peasant Movement in Pakistani Punjab, 2000-2007, Women's Roles and Activism:

Historical Background

Colonial roots of the late 20th and 21st century struggles of tenant farmers in the region of Okara, Pakistani Punjab, expose the links between colonial extractive labor policies and the later continuation under a neocolonial "neoliberal" discourse, utilized by the Pakistani Army to control these lands and marginalize the farmers from the rights promised them by the departing colonists during the time of Independence.

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, the British rulers of then undivided British India had encouraged thousands of migrants, mainly Muslims and Christians from the Eastern Punjab, now part of India, to migrate to the region which, at the time, was unproductive dry

jungle and wasteland¹⁶. The goal of the British was to make the region agriculturally productive by developing intensive irrigated agriculture drawing upon waters from the Ravi and Sutlej rivers, through an extensive network of canals. As part of the incentive to encourage migration to the barren region, the British promised the farmer settlers, proprietary rights to the land as soon as it came under cultivation¹⁷ (Akhtar 2006). Okara very soon became one of the most fertile regions in British India, but the promise by the British to give the peasants legal title to the land was never kept.

Jumping ahead almost a century later to 2000, the Pakistani military decided to change the share-cropping system under which landless peasant farmers at least had some control over their crops and usually kept a 50% share in the output. The Army rationale for the attempt to introduce the new cash rent system was that it would make the collection of rents more efficient (the usual neoliberal mantra). To the tenants, however, this new system would not only threaten their existence as cultivators, but their very economic survival, as, if they were forced to leave the farms for being unable to pay fixed amount of “rent” as cash (rentier capitalism), they would have no means of earning a living. Farmers claimed that the hidden agenda of the military was that it wanted to hand over the fertile land to retired officers for stud farming—on lands it didn’t own! These lands had *de facto*, if not *de jure*, belonged to the Punjab provincial government even during the time of the British. Indeed, the land was owned by the Imperial Government of Punjab and leased to British Army who paid rent till 1943. After Partition, the land was transferred to the Pakistani army.

Farmers’ and Peasant Women’s Resistance

The landless farmers of Okara’s military-owned farms (numbering approx. 200,000 in 2016)¹⁸-- have had a long history of resistance against the military and land-owning classes after the creation of Pakistan in 1947. The tenants (mazareen), who had been tilling the land for over a hundred years, were angered into an almost decade-long battle of collective action during the early 2000s, when, under the dictatorship of General Musharraf, attempts were made to change the extant system under which they had some rights to the land as well as a share in the profits, into a contract-based system, rendering it easier to evict the peasants with very little notice. During Musharraf’s rule, laws were passed to further corporatize agriculture (including passing on the control of the Military Dairy Farm from tenant farmers to the multinational company, Nestle). The new contract enforced on the farmers thus further eroded their rights/ control over their lives and livelihood, made their working conditions worse, and decreased wages.

In response to these repressive measures, a farmers’ organization, *Anjuman-e-Mazareen Punjab* (Punjab Farmers Collective) was formed to resist and defend their livelihood, with the power-

ful slogan making clear they would rather die than submit to these unjust changes, *Maliki Ya Maut!* (*trans:Death or Ownership!*). The slogan spelt out unequivocally, that nothing less than the century-old promise of land ownership be now fulfilled, as the Army was in fact, not the legal owner of these lands. As Rizvi points out, “the AMP enlarged tenants’ objection to cash contract farming into a discussion of land reform, citizenship rights, democracy, and human rights in Pakistan” (2019, p. 99).

With the increasing suppression by the state in response to the farmers’ rights movement, which led to massive confrontations between the army and farmers and subsequent beatings, tear-gassing, arrests, injuries and even deaths of the protestors (including women)¹⁹--, it was women who rose to the fore-front of the movement. As more and more of the AMP leaders got arrested, the women received messages from these imprisoned male leaders, asking them to, team up, go from village to village, and motivate the families to gather in protest. They were afraid that if people went into hiding, it would be very difficult to ever mobilise them again. The vacuum of power was filled by the women who went from one village to another rallying all the women, gathering in a public space or an intersection, and making moving speeches to rouse their spirits²⁰

Thaapa (a bat used for beating clothes while washing) became their symbol of resistance, and ‘*Thaapa rakh tayyar kurray*’ became the slogan used by the women peasants in Okara, meaning, ‘*Keep your washing bat ready girl!*’. When the army rangers attempted to prevent the harvest from taking place, for example, these women would show up with their *thaapas* and bar vehicles from entering the villages. Further, their movement became a truly intersectional example of feminist solidarity, bridging sectarian, religious and class divides. As Saeed points out, nearly half the population of landless peasants is Christian (p.70), and as women in the movement began acquiring leadership status, they started forging relationships with urban feminists of different class and educational backgrounds. National and international organizations linked to the Christian community started offering material and media support strengthen and publicize the movement, as did various urban-based women’s rights NGOs, which helped to forge facilitative bonds of solidarity in the face of extreme repression targeting the peasants’ rights movement by the powerful Army state apparatus (Saeed, p. 70). While the peasants have not been able to obtain full ownership of the land so far, they have managed not to give their crop to the land managers for over eleven years now (Saeed, p 73).

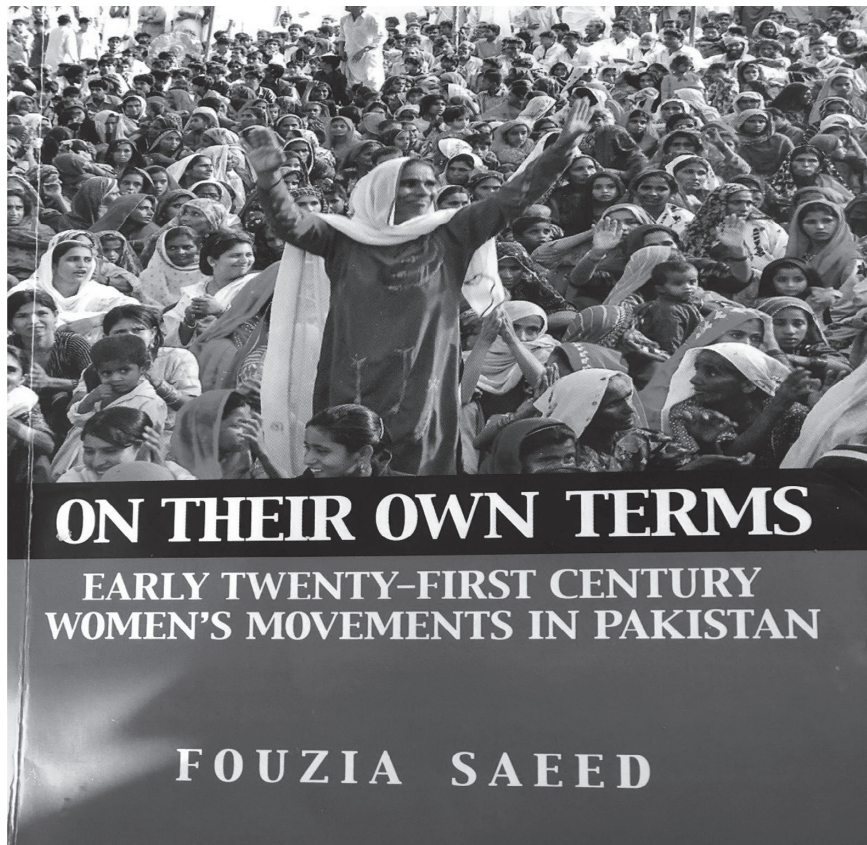


Figure 3: Book Cover Image, *On Their Own Terms*, By Fouzia Saeed

Over time, splits in the movement have occurred, with women now organized as a separate faction called the Peasant Women's Society, and some women leaders within the AMP exhibiting different leadership strategies/approaches than what they started out with. Yet, the overall mission and goal has remained the same and because of solidarity building across different groups, the movement has succeeded in ending violent confrontations between the state and the peasant farmers, and "the landless, powerless families who had considered abuse and humiliation their fate for generations now control their own lives" (Saeed p 72).

Women labor activists from the AMP, such as an Okara-based leader named Badrunnisah, who has been arrested several times over the course of this struggle for land rights, made a speech at an evening event that featured performances of skits, songs, motivational speeches and poetry in Lahore marking International Women's Day in 2018. It was organized by the newly-formed Feminist Collective composed largely of younger-generation feminists and LGBTQ activists. I was in attendance there and witnessed a variety of performances that became performatives of the remarkable solidarity across different groups and movements for social justice unfolding in contemporary Pakistan.

Here are Badrunissah's words to me, which encapsulate the feminist movement-building through performances of cross-class solidarity across urban-rural divides I have chronicled here:

I had approximately 13-14 FIR's [First Information reports that start official police and legal proceedings against accused persons] -- on me when I first came to Lahore, and I didn't think I would be with my kids, in fact I thought I would be behind bars. But before I was jailed for my activism, these feminist groups [the urban-base Women's Action Forum, and the Feminist Collective] got to me, and they have provided such incredible support to me that even if I quoted their example all my life, it wouldn't be enough. And now my kids are in Lahore, I am in Lahore, I go to Okara, I come back and handle my issues there and here. My daughter is now doing an MA in history and Law at Government College, and my son is doing his BA and has a job, thanks to support and guidance from these women's organizations who have helped us in our fight.' (Baddrunisah, interview with author, March 8th, 2018, Lahore Alhamra).



Figure 4: Photo of BaddrunisahW taken by the author

In the Pakistani province of Sind, women farmers inspired by their sisters' struggle in the Punjab, have won land tenancy for the first time; 1214 landless women farmers and sharecroppers have received land tenancy rights for the first time in their lives as of 2016



Figure 5: Women farmers/sharecroppers show off their Land Tenancy Agreements from their Landlords in Mirpur Khas District, Sindh Province, Pakistan. Photo: UN Women/Faria Salma

Before concluding this section, I want to draw attention briefly to how, across Pakistan's border with India, Indian women farmers contributed prominently to the challenge issued by the Indian Farmers Movement, against the neoliberalist, Hindu fundamentalist and rentier capitalist ideological agenda of PM Narendra Modi's government. That such was the character of the Indian Farmers Movement as a whole, was recognized as a shared experience of oppression across South Asia's borders by the Pakistani wing of Farm Workers organizations. Farooq Tariq, the general secretary of the Pakistan Kissan Rabita (Farmers' Contact) Committee (PKRC), in an interview with *The Diplomat*, for instance, called out the common struggle thus:

The Indian farmers' movement is against the neoliberal agenda that [Indian Prime Minister Narendra] Modi has been trying to impose there – privatize everything, give everything to big companies, end the **mandi** [market] system, end the minimum support price, and let the market dictate everything. Those realities already exist in Pakistan²¹

However, as Pramila Venkateswaran argues cogently²², it is important for the Indian farmers' protest movement that recently took New Delhi, India, and the world at large by storm, to be seen as an intersectional feminist issue, with women activists who are part of the long arc of farmer activism in Indian history, protesting not only the Indian state with its development model, but also patriarchy and capitalism.



Figure 6: The Economic Times: India's 'invisible' women hope for recognition at farmers' protests

Thus, referencing the environmental feminist philosopher and activist Vandana Shiva, Venkateswaran claims that Shiva's brand of ecological activism is based on understanding that the exploitation of the earth and our ecology is "both intersectional and transnational" and that the oppression of the most vulnerable, that includes Mother Earth, women, and the poor, has its roots in the neoliberal world order that yokes together colonialism and capitalism to create an undending cycle of deprivation for the many and profits for the few.

Drawing attention to grassroots movements such as Fatima Burnad's Society for Rural Education and Development (SRED), which lists support of women farmers as part of the intersectional model it uses to challenge the oppression of Dalit and women in a spirit of solidarity, that brings "religious, caste, communal, and gender perspectives into the fight for farmers' rights," Venkateswaran concludes.

As Shiva and other feminist activists see, a stitching together of agricultural activism across borders can impact governments subservient to corporate interests. In the current farmers' protest, Sikh women in the U.S., Canada, Amsterdam, are taking to the streets, bringing attention to their farming families spread over the diaspora. (Venkateswaran, "Farmers' Protest")

Drawing lessons of hope from this wave of farmers' protests, Vijay Prashad concludes, The cycle of farmer agitations and the linkage with the main trade union federations suggests the possibility of the future growth of progressive forces.²³

Afghanistan: The Nexus and its Deadly Effects on Women and their Resistance

Vera Mackie, in an article entitled "Faces of Feminism in Transnational Media Space," delineates the continuing colonialist significations of the trope of the veil as it has been used to justify the imperialist US-NATO war in Afghanistan following 9/11. Pointing to several cover images of Afghan women photographed in their seemingly ubiquitous blue burqas, Mackie observes how,

...the way that the veiled woman is deployed in a series of metonymical associations... [she stands in] for the people of Afghanistan, the land of Afghanistan, and by extension the nation-state of Afghanistan. The deployment of a female figure as metonym for the nation, however, means that any narratives of the invasion of the nation, attacks on the nation, defeat of the nation, and what has been termed the 'liberation' of the nation, are also expressed in terms of gendered metaphors.²⁴

Thus, the desire expressed by western photographers, painters, writers, occupiers of Muslim lands and the white women who support these ideological efforts to "unveil the woman" of the undifferentiated "Middle East"-- stands in for the desire to achieve full knowledge of this or that nation²⁵ and the unveiling of the woman in the case of Afghanistan, became both metaphor and metonym for 'saving' the nation from the oppressive Taliban regime by the armed forces of the United States and its allies. But as many scholars have pointed out, this "saving of the brown women from brown men,"²⁶ has provided convenient cover (pun intended)—for the US/West's continuing colonial/imperial economic and hegemonic agendas.

Mackie has termed the support by Laura Bush and the Feminist Majority Foundation of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) unleashed for 20 years in Afghanistan by the USA and its western/NATO allies, as "Imperial Feminism on Display." Ann Russo, another scholar writing on this war of occupation, reminds us how the justification for the US invasion of Afghanistan is connected to the arguments of the Feminist Majority Foundation's campaign to 'Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan.' Indeed, shortly after the decision to bomb Afghanistan had been made following the attacks on the Twin Towers on 9/11, in which NO Afghans had been involved--the figure of the veiled and oppressed Afghan woman was invoked, and 'First Lady' Laura Bush emerged from her own domestic space to make what was then a rare public speech calling for support for the 'war against terrorism' in the name of 'saving' Afghan women. In this "mission civilisatrice" First Lady Bush was backed up by feminist organizations in US such as the Feminist Majority Foundation. And while the Feminist Majority Foundation's campaign did bring public attention to some of the realities of women's lives

under the Taliban since the mid-1990s, it did so, argues Russo, from a framework of ‘imperial feminism’ that ultimately continues to bolster US world hegemony and empire.²⁷

This ‘imperial feminist’ awareness, as Russo and others point out²⁸, has circulated within US and European feminisms since the colonial era during the nineteenth century and on into the present, in service to different forms of empire building²⁹. It is a feminism that focuses exclusively on the gender-based oppression of ‘third world’ women and does so ‘without acknowledging the role of racism, colonialism and economic exploitation’ (Russo, 558).

This imperial feminism is, indeed, part and parcel of a neoliberal global economic agenda to turn every society into a “free market” for US goods and services, as seen in the trillions of dollars spent on “development” projects in Afghanistan over the past 20 years that have benefitted a few at the expense of the many. Such a feminist project ‘claims solidarity with Third World women and women of color, but in actuality contributes to the stereotyping of Third World cultures as “barbaric” and “uncivilized”’, which then justifies imperialist intervention (Russo, 558). And, Russo further underlines,

the campaign is mostly silent with respect to a history of US global geopolitical involvement in, and contributions to, the rise of the Taliban and fundamentalism in Afghanistan. Even in its current critique of the US military’s failure to provide adequate security forces and lack of follow through in supporting women’s rights in Afghanistan, the Feminist Majority Foundation never questions the underlying premises of the US invasion and the right to control the future of Afghanistan (Russo, 559).

And this “right to control” has, as I have also been arguing, has everything to do with maintaining the economic advantage of capitalist neoliberalism for US Empire in our own day and age. Michael Schwartz also draws attention to this nexus of US military neoliberalism/ neoliberal US-backed enterprise of state-building that has occurred through a displacement of the Afghan state itself when he claims that Republican President George W. Bush’s National Security Strategy of 2006, which was the predecessor of Democratic President Barak Obama’s NSS four years later,

included nine ‘essential tasks’ assigned to the United States military, many of them having nothing to do with the military. Prominent among these tasks: **‘Ignite a new era of global economic growth through free markets and free trade’**³⁰

Indeed, the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS, 2008- 2013), which was written for the neoliberal transnational corporate interests represented by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), listed as the third goal of its Prioritization and Implementa-

tion Plan (PIP) from mid-2010 to mid-2013, that poverty reduction and development will be based on a “*private-sector-led market economy*,” without noting the growing economic gap between the poor and the rich and the resentment this gap has created within and among and between different sectors within, societies.³¹ Such neoliberal-driven state-building enterprises working in tandem with an ongoing occupation and bombing campaign orchestrated by the US, have created resentment among the majority of rural based poor Afghans (including women)—against this intervention that led to corruption and worsening conditions for them and contributed to the rise back into power of the Taliban.³²

RAWA, Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan—and Women’s Resistance

For many years before the so-called global ‘war against terrorism’ (GWOT), non-governmental organizations, including The Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA), had been circulating information to the West and around the world about the oppressive conditions suffered by women under the regimes of the Mujahideen (who the US supported)—and their successors, the Taliban. Women and girl children were being prevented from receiving an education or working outside the home and their freedom and mobility were severely restricted. Regular reports and petitions were circulated by e-mail for several years before the so-called ‘war against terrorism’ commenced. However, in those years, there was no move to intervene in this situation from the United States, its allies, or the United Nations.

RAWA was formed in Afghanistan by Meena Keshwar Kamal in 1977, decades prior to the unfolding of GWOT, as an indigenous resistance movement of Afghan women against ongoing repression of their fundamental human rights under various regimes backed in those years by either the Soviet Union or the USA. Later, once the Taliban took office for the first time in 1996 following the defeat of the Soviet forces by US-armed mujahideen fighters, RAWA protested against the misogynistic religious fundamentalist beliefs being propagated to further curb Afghan women’s rights and access to education and employment. Meena eventually moved and based her RAWA organization in Quetta, Pakistan, as it became too dangerous for her to continue living in Afghanistan. Both she and her husband were assassinated in Pakistan by suspected agents of KHAD, the Afghan Secret Service, and men in the employ of Gulbeddin Hekmatyar, an Afghan warlord, respectively, a few months apart in 1986/87.

According to its website, RAWA has continued its activities in Pakistan over the many decades since Meena’s death, focusing on women’s rights, human rights and exposition of the barbaric actions of Taliban extremists. Despite lack of funding and political support from neoliberal regimes, RAWA maintained its social work activities on behalf of Afghan women from refugee camps in Quetta and Peshawar. As scholar and community psychologist Anne Brodsky who has written a book about RAWA points out admiringly in a recent interview,

On both sides of the Durand Line – the British-drawn boundary between Afghanistan and what is now Pakistan – RAWA established schools and orphanages for Afghan boys and girls, literacy programmes for older women, health clinics and income-generating programmes.³³

RAWA’s website also states that as part of their cultural activism (artivism), they have produced cassettes of songs usually with anti-fundamentalist content and containing educational content, they have staged dramas and skits; held “Nights of poetry” and “Nights of story”; published posters, brochures, booklets, “Payam-e-Zan” (both online and printed editions) in Pashtu, Persian and Urdu and the non-periodical “The Burst of The ‘Islamic Government’ Bubble in Afghanistan” in English.³⁴

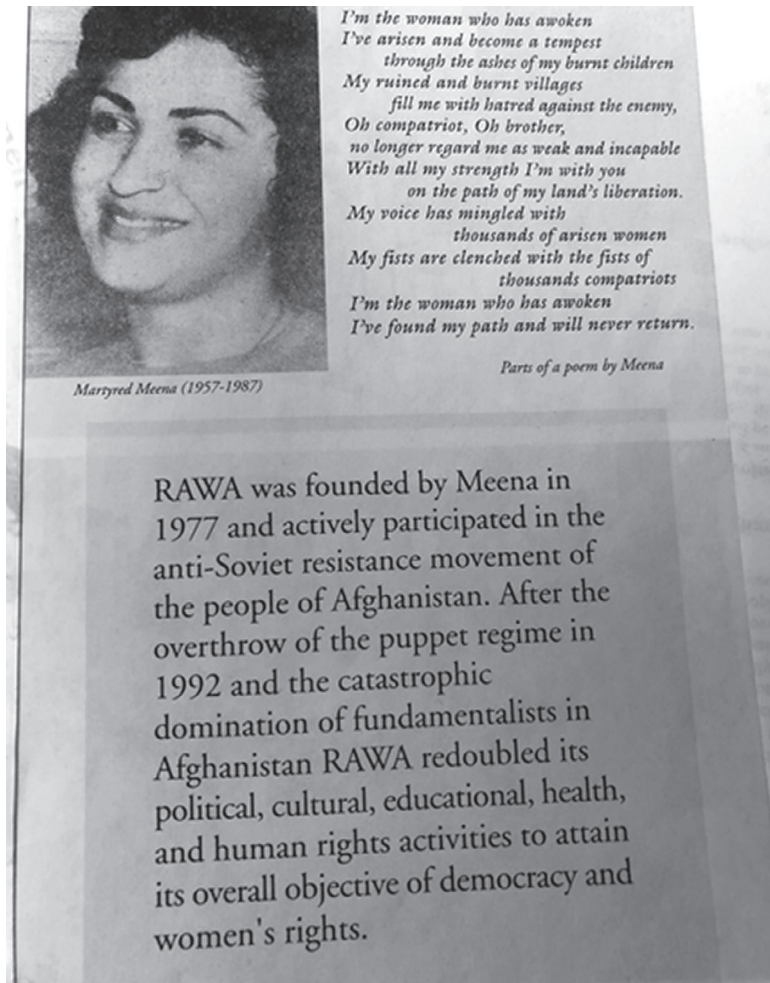


Figure 7: Poem by and Photo of Meena, Founder of RAWA- Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, circa 1986

However, RAWA has always raised awareness around the situation in Afghanistan being a result of many forces, including unwelcome foreign interventions buoyed up a neoliberal economic world system that keeps all manner of “fundamentalisms” in play and power at the expense of peoples’ rights and security. Indeed, RAWA from its inception, saw/called out the nexus of fundamentalist patriarchy working in tandem with forces of neoliberal/postmodern capitalism and imperialism to keep the entire citizenry of Afghanistan impoverished. For instance, on the first days of the US occupation of Afghanistan in 2001, RAWA had declared in a public statement published on the internet dated October 11, 2001:

The continuation of US attacks and the increase in the number of innocent civilian victims not only gives an excuse to the Taliban, but also will cause the empowering of the fundamentalist forces in the region and even in the world.³⁵

And, later, during the era of the Obama administration, RAWA had this to say:

The so-called ‘new’ strategy of Obama’s administration and the surge of troops in Afghanistan have already dragged our ill-fated people in the danger zone and his 100-day old government proved itself as much more war-mongering than Bush and his only gifts to our people is hiking killings and ever-horrifying oppression. This administration is bombarding our country and tearing our women and children into pieces and from the other side, is lending a friendly hand towards the terrorist Gulbuddinis and Taliban -- the dirty, bloody enemies of our people-- and holding secret negotiations and talks with such brutal groups.³⁶

Here is RAWA’s statement on the 20-year US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan and its economically disastrous effects that have in fact, strengthened the hand of the Taliban:

It is worth mentioning that the United States and the West have tried for 20 years to keep Afghanistan a consumer country and have hindered the growth of industry. This situation created a wave of unemployment and poverty, paving the way for the recruitments of the puppet government, the Taliban and growth of opium production.

Alongside this strong indictment of US economic “underdevelopment” in Afghanistan, RAWA also provided a broader overview of this terrible war and its consequences for women:

In the past 20 years, one of our demands was an end to the US/NATO occupation and even better if they take their Islamic fundamentalists and technocrats with them and let our people decide their own fate. This occupation only resulted in bloodshed, destruction and chaos. They turned our country into the most corrupt, insecure, drug-mafia and dangerous place especially for women...from the very beginning we could predict such an outcome.

Indeed, the only logical conclusion to the ongoing destruction visited not just on Afghanistan, but the planet, has led RAWA to issue a clarion call for transnational solidarity among progressive forces, led by women, around the globe. On International Women's Day 2022, RAWA declared, in a clear-eyed statement, the need to recognize, and thence to continue "our fight against, the tyrannical ideological nexus of patriarchal religion, neoliberal capitalism, and imperialism"³⁷

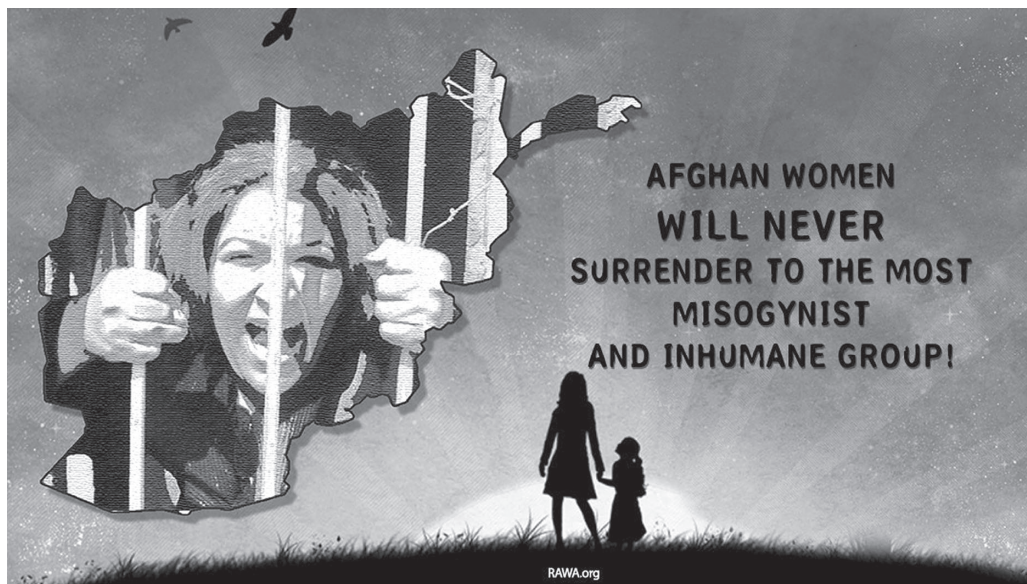


Figure 8: RAWA statement on the International Women's Day, 2022:

The women of Afghanistan, who have been held captive by the most misogynist and inhuman group in the history of our country, due to the 20-year betrayal and crimes of the US/NATO and their Afghan mercenaries, are living in cruelly odious times. The ongoing conditions proves that the world has once again completely forgotten them. On the eve of the International Women's Day, a large-scale campaign in support of Afghan women was expected around the world, but due to the Ukraine crisis and the conflict between the opposing militarist superpowers, the case of Afghanistan, and especially its women, has once again become completely indifferent.... the fight against terrorism would be incomplete without the fight against imperialism and its ideologies. Forty years betrayal of the White House and its fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist mercenaries proved to Afghan people by experience that a homeland can't be saved by relying on any external power and its puppets. Only with the slogan of death to fundamentalism and imperialism under the banner of secular democracy, can we overcome the catastrophic disaster and open the way to full political and economic independence, freedom and social justice. Afghan women must be at the forefront of this great struggle because they have shown in practice that they have the potential and the determination for such a great cause. Now that imperialist states and deadly arms traders have turned the planet into a gunpowder depot on the eve of another world war, it is the

responsibility of every conscious human being to seek to revive the international anti-war and anti-imperialist movement. If especially the people of the great imperialist countries do not perform this task, the super-capitalists will lead the world to complete destruction of human future for their own benefit.

(<http://www.rawa.org/rawa/2022/03/08/afghan-women-will-never-surrender-to-the-most-misogynist-and-inhumane-group.html>)

A Conclusion That is Ongoing: Progressive Solidarities

Vijay Prashad, in his inspiring book about earlier anticolonial movements (as exemplified in the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement) and how their political insights and solidarities need to be revived in our own times, offers the following conclusion that is ongoing:

The third world may be in distress, where the will of the national liberation movements has put the tendency to anti-imperialism in crisis, and where the Third World within the United States has often been overrun by the dynamic of the color blind and of the desire to make small, individual gains over social transformation. Nevertheless, the struggle is on, in places like Kerala and Vietnam, but also within the USA as the Black Radical Congress greets the Asian Left Forum, the Forum of Indian Leftists, the League of Filipino Students...and all of them join together in the fight against imperialism, against racism. **History is made in the struggle and past memories of solidarity are inspiration for that struggle**³⁸.

Indeed, the women activists of RAWA are a prime instantiation of Prashad's contention that the "struggle is on," for their statement on International Women's Day 2022 is a clarion call for all progressive forces to join and participate in this movement for solidarity against the deadly nexus:

While we do not expect the slightest from the warring Western governments and the rulers of the neighbors involved in Afghanistan, we call on the progressive forces, women's rights organizations, progressive figures and peace activists to side with the miserable women and people of Afghanistan and to disclose and condemn the interventions of their policy-makers.

An important component of what I'm calling an ongoing "conclusion", is our recognition that we clearly haven't yet reached it and may never do so, but which therefore requires us to recommit to the struggle at every stage and in our own era, such a recognition demands that we acknowledge a worldwide debt to Black Feminism.

Black feminism provides us with the possibility of a coalitional model of politics that can help us re-commit to the goals of progressive solidarity to end the chokehold (pun unintended) of the nexus of neoliberal capitalism, imperialism and religious as well as secular patriarchies. Therefore,

now is a perfect time to enunciate clearly, the meaning of Black feminist identity politics that requires us to recognize it as a maneuver of strategic essentialism, en route to building affiliative coalitions across race, class, gender, sexuality and nation.³⁹ Black feminism has produced an influential analysis and approach to combating all forms of oppression — particularly patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism—within a common struggle that has come to be known as identity politics, but one that calls for broad (re) conception of “identity” that can—nay, must—move from essentialist understandings of identity to identity-as-affiliation, arising out of shared political visions and affiliations. This is a form of politics that can be called feminist, anti-racist, socialist, and I would add, also anti-imperialist.¹

Today, the most progressive forms of Black feminism embrace the notion that solidarity means to fight for someone you don’t know but whose vision for social change you share. This Black feminist call for solidarity whilst based in ideas of difference-in-identity, moves beyond it to notions of affiliation leading to a coalitional politics (an idea also at the root of Jesse Jackson’s rallying cry in the 1980s for a Rainbow Coalition)—and in so doing invites us to look at hierarchies of class, gender, sexuality and race, and to grasp how these hierarchies impact both individuals and collectives. A Black model of feminism thus has the power to foster solidarity and make our movements stronger. Solidarity doesn’t mean we are all the same or always in agreement; but it does open up the space for collective action toward political goals that are interlinked in a struggle to create a better, more equitable and just world. Therefore, solidarity requires that we not subscribe to a narrowly conceived idea of “identity”—but rather, embrace a global and transnational affiliative politics, that is rooted in the recognition of identity as intersectional, allowing us to work together to ensure a world for generations that follow, that will be based on social justice ideals. That is the reward of a transnational feminist commitment to end the injustices perpetuated by the intertwined nexus of neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism.⁴⁰

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ENDNOTES

1 Fawzia Afzal-Khan is Professor of English, a University Distinguished Scholar (2009-10), and former Director of the Women and Gender Studies Program at Montclair State University, NJ (2009-2015). In addition to having published numerous scholarly and journalistic essays, poems, plays and a memoir *Lahore with Love: Growing Up With Girlfriends Pakistani Style* (Syracuse University Press, 2010), she has authored three books of scholarly criticism, *Cultural Imperialism: Genre and Ideology in the Indo-English Novel* (Penn State Press 1993), *A Critical Stage: The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan* (Seagull Press, 2005), and *Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan Through its Women Singers* (OUP: 2020), and edited two scholarly anthologies, *The PreOccupation of Postcolonial Studies* (Duke University Press, 2000), and *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* (Interlink Books 2005).

Fellowships awarded include most recently, the Fulbright-Hays Visiting Specialist award (2016-2022), and the National Endowment for the Humanities Bridging Cultures Through Film award (2011). She has also held a W.E.B Dubois Fellowship at Harvard University and been a Rotary International and AIPS (American Institute of Pakistan Studies) Fellow and won an NJCH (NJ Council of the Humanities) grant for a symposium on Women's Cross-Cultural Prison Memoirs. She was also Writer-in-Residence at Chateau de Lavigny in Switzerland 2005 which enabled her to complete her memoir.

Afzal-Khan is a trained vocalist in North Indian Classical music, a published playwright, actor and poet, whose scholarly, journalistic and creative writing focuses on issues of gender and social justice from a post-colonial perspective.

She is also producer and director of the award-winning short documentary film, *Siren Song*, about Pakistani women singers, which has several different versions including an earlier one called *The Nightingales of Pakistan: from the Melody Queen to the Muslim Madonna*. She is a regular contributor to *Counterpunch.org*, and currently serves on the Editorial and/or Advisory Boards of *TDR (The Drama Review)* and *Arab Stages* and has served in the past on the boards of *SAR (South Asian Review)*, *Transformations*, and *International Solidarity (Journal of Pakistani English Literature)*. She is a member of the NY chapter of NOW (National Organization of Women), the Modern Language Association and NWSA, where she is founding chair of the South Asian Feminist Caucus. She is a long-time member of IFTR (International Federation of Theatre Research) where she has belonged to the Feminist Research Working Group for over 20 years. She maintains a blog called www.travelingfeminista.com and her website can be accessed at www.fawziaafzalkhan.com

2 <https://monthlyreview.org/2021/03/01/racial-capitalism-and-covid-19/>

3 Noam Chomsky, interviewed by David Barsamian, in *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many*, Odonian Press, 1994, p 5.

4 <https://www.ids.ac.uk/events/the-corruption-of-capitalism-why-rentiers-thrive-and-work-does-not-pay/>
 5 Zoom, for instance, made 660 million\$ in 2020, but paid 0 federal income tax on profits which increased over the previous year by 4000%. According to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, at least 55 of the largest US corporations paid zero\$ in Federal taxes on 2020 profits.

6 Nancy Fraser, Cinzia Arruza and Tithi Bhattacharya, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, Verso Books, 2019.
 7 “breaking the glass ceiling” can be seen as akin to liberal mainstreaming of gender—by simply incorporating women (add and stir) into existing structures, rather than transforming the structures themselves.

8 See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Holt and Company, 2007.

9 See Fawzia Afzal-Khan, “Exposed by Pakistani Theatre: the Unholy Alliance of Postmodern Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Fundamentalism,” in *Social Text*. Vol 19, number 4 (69), 2001. P. 67-91. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-19-4_69-67

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- 11 Aasim Sajjad Akhtar et al point out, and I agree: "there is evidence that the emergence of the religious right as a political force in Pakistan is an outcome of state patronage. Following the 'War on Terror', corporate media and official western representations of revivalist trends in Pakistan have been almost completely de-contextualised. This representation has provided both the dominant military state oligarchy and the religious right an ideal opportunity to reinforce an old alliance previously supported by western imperialism, while eroding the organising capacity of progressive social and political forces in Pakistan." "Reading between the lines: the *mullah* – military alliance in Pakistan," in *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol 15, Issue 4: 2006 (383-397). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584930701329982>
- 12 For further elaboration of the coming together of women's rights and theatre activists especially during the 1980s and 90s, see Fawzia Afzal-Khan, *A Critical Stage: The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan* (Seagull Press, 2005).
- 13 "The object of the WPB [Women's Protection Bill] was to 'bring the laws relating to zina (sex outside of marriage) and qazf (perjury), in particular, in conformity with the stated objectives of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and...in particular to provide relief and protection to women against misuse and abuse of law.' The most important feature of the WPB is that it breaks the link between the offenses of rape and zina, so that a woman who brings a charge of rape is no longer in jeopardy of being prosecuted for zina." <https://www.dawn.com/news/630865/2006-political-drama-of-womensprotection-bill>
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- 18 Statistics reported in <https://newlinemagazine.com/magazine/land-land-peasants-okara-fight-rights/>
- 19 "Peasant women were confronted by the military officials at Okara Military Farms while protesting against the arrest of Mehr Abdul Sattar [one of the leaders of the resistance movement]," says Asim Raza Dogar a local resident and activist. "The army surpassed all limits of brutality when they sent tanks and guns to target their own citizens, many of whom were injured." Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, *Newsbeat National*, 2016. <https://newlinemagazine.com/magazine/land-land-peasants-okara-fight-rights/>

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- 24 Vera Mackie, "Faces of Feminism in Transnational Media Space," http://www.igs.ocha.ac.jp/igs/IGS_publication/journal/6/journal06001.pdf (accessed Jan 9th, 2022).
- 25 One of the earliest such studies is of French photographers in Algeria, documented and analyzed at length by Malek Alloula in *The Colonial Harem*, University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- 26 This phrase was popularized by postcolonial feminist critic and scholar G.C. Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993, p. 93.
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- 29 See for example, Lila Abu-Lughod's now iconic essay on the topic, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others" in *American Anthropologist*, vol. 104, No. 3 (Sep 2002), pp. 783-790.
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- 39 Strategic essentialism is a concept coined by postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak, that advocates a provisional acceptance of essentialist foundations for categories of identity such as those of gender, race, class etc, mobilizing such identitarian notions as a strategy for shaping broader collective affiliations in order to pursue shared political goals. See Gayatri C. Spivak, "Deconstructing Historiography," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988. pp. 3-32.
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