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Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan Through Its Women Singers
by Fawzia Afzal-Khan (review)

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reform efforts spawned a discourse about “temple dancing” that conflated the dancer with the prostitute and affirmed the unique role Odisha played in the Western imaginary as a terrain of extreme barbarism “used to illustrate India’s absolute difference from Western civilization” (228). Odissi escapes associations with savagery in the post-Independence period with its metamorphosis into a “classical dance.” Banerji traces this process in light of the state’s role in cultural affairs, regional theatrical forms, noteworthy performances, and influential advocates. She examines the emergence of the dance’s distinct styles and codified repertoire, exploring the limiting effects of a classical status. In the end, however, she affirms Odissi’s “ontological flexibility” (355).

The book is organized into three parts named in correspondence with the progression of repertory items featured in an Odissi performance. Figures of artworks and photos amply accompany the discussion. The appendices, index, and bibliography are testimony to a detailed research methodology and exhaustive engagement with academic literature. The author’s voice alternates between close empirical examinations, grounded theoretical discussions, and poetic evocations of the dance and its representations. Scholars, dancers, and students will find both critical knowledge and pleasure in the invitation to approach history from an impassioned, rational perspective, on the one hand, and a sense of informed wonder, on the other. This book sets a gold standard for dance historiography and will be a seminal text in South Asian studies for years to come.

—*Shanti Pillai*

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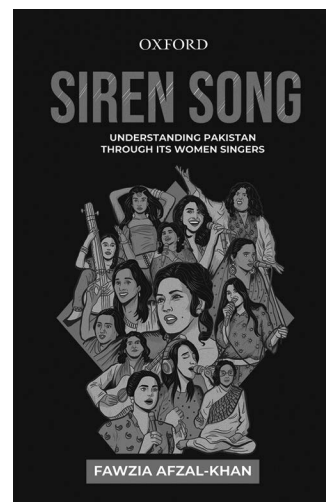
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Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan Through Its Women Singers. By Fawzia Afzal-Khan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; 252 pp.; illustrations. \$20.00 paper.

In *Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan Through Its Women Singers*, Fawzia Afzal-Khan gives a cultural history of Pakistan from a “herstorical account from below” (xviii), putting selected famous Pakistani female singers center stage as her key heuristic site for this alternative to official state narratives. Afzal-Khan examines the work of three generations of female singers including Noor Jehan, Malka Pukraj, Runa Laila, Nazia Hassan, Deeyah Khan, and the younger generation of Coke Studio singers. She further traces the way these singers’ performances “create cultural representations of gender identities” (xx), challenging embedded cultural gender norms of Pakistan.

An important addition to work at the intersection of critical feminist studies, performance, and postcolonial studies—especially in the Pakistani context—Afzal-Khan’s writing uses



an interdisciplinary “postcolonial feminist cultural studies approach” (xix). She indigenizes the work through a focus on Pakistan-centric critical voices, especially of female scholars. By indigenizing cultural studies methodologies, Afzal-Khan develops her own postcolonial and feminist Pakistani theoretical framework, making a much-needed intervention in the field. Afzal-Khan asks how useful a “postcolonial feminist cultural studies methodology” is in understanding the formation of the Pakistani nation-state and how various generations of female singers have contributed to its shaping (127). I welcome Afzal-Khan’s in-depth framing of the singers’ stories within feminist discourse and her preliminary engagement with debates on Muslim women’s agency and identity, only with one reservation that she does not tackle the evolving category of “Islamic feminists” on the ground today. Afzal-Khan nuances the current “reductionist reading” of these pop-divas beyond what she calls “resistors” or entities “exercising agency” (124). As an “insider” hijab-wearing Pakistani Muslim feminist performing artist, I embody the present dilemma within the Pakistani women’s movement: the need to broaden perspectives and re-define or challenge, in order to promote women’s equality (Tadros and Khan 2018), the current categories for viewing Pakistani female artists beyond a binary perspective of the human rights framework—“secular”/“liberal” or “Islamic feminist.” The new generation of Pakistani artists who grew up after General Zia-ul-Haq’s martial law—and the problematic “Islamization of Pakistan”—and the millennial feminists (Khan 2021) are finding their own paths and new perspectives beyond the binaries, which are still unwritten and may be encompassed in an unarticulated “third space” (Zubair and Zubair 2017). Nevertheless, the book painstakingly challenges readers to gauge the extent to which women singers explicate the complicated, multilayered history of Pakistan, “negotiating and resisting the cultural structures and codes that interpellate them” (xxvii).

Understanding culture as a site of constant conflict, Afzal-Khan takes a feminist psychoanalytic approach to go beyond privileging texts over readers, a problem she highlights in the main bodies of cultural studies theory. The issue of prioritizing text over subjects and their bodies has received much attention in the field of dance studies in recent years. Scholars are experimenting with creative writing strategies to put the body of the dancing subject and their creative product center stage and from that vantage point analyze society and the cultural milieu: subject and milieu influencing each other simultaneously. Afzal-Khan’s methodology, introduced in the first chapter of the book, is inspired by a dance studies approach (Aslam 2012). It explores maestro Malka Pukhraj’s memoir *Song Sung True* (2007) and traces continuities between the occluded past of Hindu-majority India and the Muslim-majority nation of Pakistan. But unlike dance scholars and musicologists, Afzal-Khan’s focus is not on cultural production and music per se. Chapter 2 takes up the public and personal life of Roshan Ara, one of the greatest classical singers of North India, to elicit contradictions and dilemmas in response to state and societal patriarchal ideology in South Asia. In particular, the chapter explores how female singers’ private lives are adversely impacted by imbricated discourses of “gender, class respectability, religion and national identity” in the aftermath of the 1947 “Long Partition” (Zamindar) and the impact of Hindu dominated Indian cultural nationalism (42). In chapter 3 Afzal-Khan looks at three singers: Madame Noor Jehan aka the “Melody Queen,” Abida Parveen, and—surprisingly—Norwegian Pakistani singer Deeyah Khan. These singers perform in three different eras and genres of music but, as Afzal-Khan argues, daringly challenge patriarchal and Islamist discourses in Pakistan. Chapter 4 teases out the interface of “classical” and “folk” music and complicates narratives of resistance and oppression via class stratification as Afzal-Khan engages with the life of Gypsy Rajasthani singer Reshma, who has now become a famous Pakistani household name. Chapter 5 undertakes a “microhistorical approach” (89) to claim three border transgressor singers as practitioners of “minority discourse” (89) who successfully crossed and established the continuities between the occluded past and present-day Muslim Pakistan: Madame Noor Jehan, Runa Laila, and Nazia Hassan (Pakistan’s Queen of Disco). Continuing the thread of excavating forgotten linkages and histories in the aftermath of the 1947 partition, Afzal-Khan raises thought-provoking questions and makes apt connections between “class and

neo-colonial imperatives” (112) in her sixth and final chapter, “Unsettling the Nation.” Through a case study of the new TV phenomenon of the *Coke Studio*, Afzal-Khan traces the rise of young female singers from the middle class and examines how a play of respectability politics elevated them as celebrities by means of the pop versions of songs, instead of the original singers of the songs who came from modest backgrounds and remained in poverty and without any patronage.

Overall Afzal-Khan’s work is a very welcome addition to the scholarly writing on Pakistan’s music and performing arts traditions and builds on preliminary work on shared South Asian feminist historiographies of performing artists. Particularly commendable and refreshing is Afzal-Khan’s inclusion of her personal narrative as an aspiring singer trained in classical vocal singing. This gives the reader a front-row view of the Indo-Pakistani classical singing world as well as Afzal-Khan’s artistic engagements as a practitioner, described in the book’s coda. Her work also gives impetus to the project of reclaiming Pakistan’s Indic past and the preservation of its intangible cultural heritage.

—Feriya Amal Aslam

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In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance. By

Amelia Jones. London: Routledge, 2021; 359 pp.; illustrations. \$96.00 cloth, \$23.99 paper, e-book available.

Amelia Jones’s inventive new book *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* investigates the connections between queer theory, gender performance, and performativity by historicizing concepts in postwar US-American society, intellectual thought, and art/performance practices. Each chapter is centered around a pivotal concept related to queer performance, such as “performativity” and “trans.” Within each chapter, Jones foregrounds artistic practices “ignored or marginalized at the time of their expression and in these genealogies of queer and performance discourses because of their subcultural assertively non-normatively raced and classed, and/or extreme nature” (3). *In Between Subjects* crucially points out the