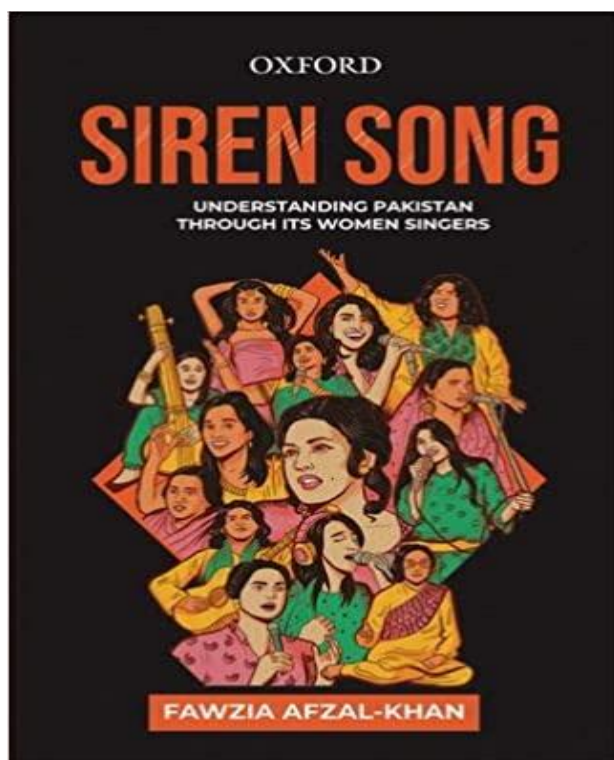


Fawzia Afzal-Khan, *Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan Through Its Women Singers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 252 pp. ISBN-9780190700546.



Fawzia Afzal-Khan, in her book *Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan Through Its Women Singers*, captures the experiences of Pakistani female singers who are part of a narrative wrought with struggle and hardships yet strewn by rich cultural elements. These experiences continue to add to the musical genre, contributing artistically, to not just Pakistan, but to the whole South Asian region and its 'herstorical' perspective. The writer provides intellectual room for an alternative reading of an otherwise male oriented genre.

Afzal-Khan employs a methodology that focuses on the local cultural narrative but analyzes it through Western ideology. Her aim is to highlight the importance of struggles as experienced by female Pakistani singers. She traces the argument historically, employing a colonial narrative in the pre- and post-independence era of the subcontinent. This linear argument provides her with room to validate the struggles of women singers. She blames the "anti-art" and "anti-culture" post-independent agendas for the decrepit state of affairs for women singers. Afzal-Khan has openly denounced the prevalent idealistic

narrative laid down by the imperialist discourse and aims “to provide interested readers with a sense of Pakistan’s cultural history from a different perspective than that extolled by official state narratives” (xviii).

Fawzia Afzal-Khan brings various theoretical perspectives at the crossroads to bring about interesting and meaningful academic collaborations which help produce meaning for women studies. In *Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan Through Its Women Singers*, she mixes up Muslim pop art, feminism, culture, and the performing arts to evaluate the position of women in Pakistan.

Afzal-Khan studies Malka Pukraj and Roshan Ara Begum, delving into their courtesan imagery and their statures as representative of rich cultural heritage. In doing so, such female singers fell a subject to the expected female representation. These were not just good singers, but first and foremost ‘obedient wives.’ The patriarchy involved in the courtesan culture leads to the struggles they faced in maintaining an individualistic performative capability. Their roles as wives and mothers overcome the talent they possessed.

In a post 9/11 world where racial, national, and religious cleavages are pervasive realities, even arts and culture are politicised. The writer crosses geographical spaces and temporal realities by bringing in Deleuze and the idea of “stratification.” This argument helps Afzal-Khan propel a construct where she is successful in creating a scenario with women singers having a multitude and yet, singular issues of gendered politicisation. The author makes an effort to advocate the female Pakistani community, by bringing in three great singers, Madam Noor Jehan, Abida Parveen, and Deeyah. She talks of the merging together of the sensual and the spiritual, the exotic and the mystic. By bringing in ideological commonalities of the three, she achieves an objective, defying the Western judgmental gaze that grew post 9/11 and sought to spot elements of terrorism and violence in Pakistan society. But by deploying the genre of Sufi music in her thesis, Afzal-Khan has created a self-refuting point, where she diverges her discussion to Madam Noor Jahan, and how she became a Queen from a Marasi. The shift took place with the intermingling of the sexual appeal with that of the spiritual, though she rarely resorted her music to the spiritual.

In the book, the author initiates a debate whether or not classical music is a derivative of folk music. She places Reshma at the threshold as an apt example. The refusal to accept this technical fact by the music enthusiast proved to be a tough nut for artists like Reshma to be accepted easily into the mainstream music industry. She lauds Reshma and Abida Parveen for not resorting to rootlessness from their ideas of folk tradition to welcome societal acceptability.

In claiming the fact that female singers have been subject to politicising, Afzal-Khan talks about Runa Laila and Nazia Hassan along with Madam Noor Jahan. She provides instances from their musical careers to show that their talents and abilities were utilised for fueling nationalist ideologies by state-run agencies. Afzal-Khan creates this concept of musical Othering by analyzing a singer in a

country not of their birth. Runa Laila appearing as a judge in an Indian show was seen as a foreign/neutral entity and not someone who actually *belonged* there in a space reserved for music and singing. She validates the battles fought by Nazia Hassan when she had to prove that music was a hobby for her and not a paying profession like that of a courtesan, so that she could uphold the family honor.

Afzal-Khan brings in issues of profanity, obscurantist culture forcing fatwas on artists, and complications relating to cross cultural and cross bordered matters. Her methodology is varied in the sense that she progresses her argument both, in a linear and a temporal space, trying to grasp at all directions. In doing so, she tries to advocate the difficulties faced not only by the Pakistani female singers, but those belonging to the entire south Asian region. Afzal-Khan's approach is significant in appropriating her argument beyond national boundaries and in establishing that women across South Asia hold similar challenges in carving an artistic niche for themselves.

Afzal-Khan delineates the role of Pakistani female singers in using their arts as a tool for political voice. Iqbal Bano reserves a prominent name who sang Faiz's 'revolutionary anthem' during General Zia's era. This 1987 performance of Faiz's, *Hum Dekhen Gay* at Alhamrah Hall, Lahore stands symbolic of Bano's courage and bravery in the face of dictatorship especially in times when women voice in political discourses was conspicuous by its absence in Islamic settings. Afzal-Khan's book provides a nexus of intersecting challenges that have shaped her historic narratives. It was not just religious extremism that made acceptance of female singers challenging but also the political atmosphere that had no space for artistic voices.

In post 9/11 Pakistan, extremism threatens the lives of female singers across the country. Afzal-Khan places Pakistani politics as an active agent in using Taliban culture to meet its own agendas: shaping a societal decorum for female artists that more or less demands their complete absence from any artistic platforms. However, the resilience of female singers continues to operate against these combined forces of politics to use arts as a medium of expression and voice. Here, Afzal-Khan brings to light the Pashtun sisters Zeb and Haniya who defied all the challenges and took to national TV channels for playing guitar and entertaining masses across the country with their unique Pushto arts.

By looking down the lane of Pakistan's history of arts and music while highlighting challenges faced by female artists, Afzal-Khan wants her readers to shun any simplistic understanding of culture, patriarchy, societal norms, and national expectations. For her, the resilience of female singers in the face of various challenges is a testimony of empowerment: a realisation that shifts the identification of Pakistani artists as 'passive victims' to powerful agents who know well how to use arts for voicing their opinions. Afzal-Khan's *Siren Song* is also an attempt to dismantle Western simulacra of Muslim women that are nothing more

than “head-to-toe covered women” who lack the freedom and liberty to stand up for the basic rights let alone use performative arts as a form of expression.

Afzal-Khan substantiates her argument by mentioning the much loved and applauded trio of Benjamin Sisters during the 1980s. Their appreciation and acceptance by the Pakistani community shows an inclusivity of religious others in media and arts. To imagine this during the regime of General Zia would be near impossible, however, such examples are a testament to multilayered understanding of female freedom and expression and demand shunning of conventional models. Afzal-Khan affirms that identification of female artists as non-passive victims is not in any way tantamount to struggles of female artists, but it only brings to surface their strength and constant resilience that has left a legacy for coming generations.

The book gains its strength by combining the elements of the music industry with that of religious ideology and societal complications. Fawzia Afzal-Khan, in bridging these ideological gaps, highlights the trials and tribulations faced by female Pakistani singers. These difficulties were shaped by not just internal societal issues, but in fact, external or Western biased ideologies had ramifications on their lives as public figures. The book appeals and is an aid to researchers of gender studies specialising in culture, performing arts, and feminist discourse.

**Areej Jawad**  
**University of Central Punjab, Pakistan**  
**Email: 11f20meng0015@ucp.edu.pk**

**Namra Najam**  
**University of Central Punjab**  
**Email: 11f20meng0003@ucp.edu.pk**