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Afghan women: identity and invasion

Elaheh Rostami-Povey; Zed Books, London, 2007, 168pp., ISBN: 978-1-84277-856-2, £17.99 (pbk)

So much has been written on Afghan women in the last ten years and yet so little is still known about who they are, what they need or what they want. Dominant (specifically western) scholarship on Afghan women, often speaks about them, with the assertion that they are representing 'authentic' voices and experience of Afghan women. These women are portrayed as silent and passive victims of their culture, their men and their politics. Sometimes we are introduced to an extraordinary Afghan woman who defies her culture and becomes a symbol of progress and hope for advancing women's rights in Afghanistan. But even these women can not fight without the west's (militarized) assistance. The voices lacking in this scholarship are those of the everyday woman, the one who has survived decades of war, who has continued to find ways to meet the needs of her family, and is still finding ways to survive under escalating insecurity, poverty and patriarchal oppression. Elaheh Rostami-Povey's book *Afghan women: Identity and Invasion* makes an exceptional effort to share voices of such Afghan women, who are easily ignored, appropriated and/or marginalized in dominant discourses. This book shares narratives of Afghan women who are living under and actively resisting local and foreign oppressions. Although these women have always faced multiple social, economic and political limitations, Rostami-Povey demonstrates that they have never been passive or silent. Rather, they have been fighting for their rights and self-determination long before the west invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Even in exile, Rostami-Povey explains, Afghan women continue to empower themselves by constantly fighting stereotypes about their culture, their religion, and creating solidarity with other Afghan and Muslim women of various backgrounds.

This book is divided into five chapters. The first is the 'Introduction', which includes a brief discussion of gender, ethnicity, agency and identity. Also included is a brief history of how gender relations have been affected by ethnic conflict, state formation, state-society relations and imperial domination. There are two points worth noting; firstly, the problem of women's rights is not a result of recent conflicts, but rather something that was never implemented properly in the first place. 'Women's rights were formulated by the predominantly male Afghan elite and were generally based on western models of women's rights which were culturally insensitive and

unpopular with the majority of Afghan women' (p. 12). Thus Afghan women are already familiar with the challenges of advancing gender-based equality. The second point Rostami-Povey raises is that while Afghan women continue to struggle against rigid practices of patriarchy, they must now also struggle against foreign invasion and appropriation of their voices and identities. In particular, Afghan women feel that western feminists have been blaming Afghan men for their condition. But they see men 'as being affected by the same economic, social and political forces' (p. 7). Moreover, Rostami-Povey argues that contrary to popular belief, many Afghan men stood by Afghan women to challenge male domination and superiority.

The second chapter, 'Resistance and struggle under the Taliban', provides a detailed description of women's activities under the Taliban. Rostami-Povey shares voices of women in Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan to document the various ways they resisted Taliban oppression. The chapter also focuses on women's activism under previous imperial powers, including the Soviet Union, Great Britain and the United States. According to Rostami-Povey, the presence of the United States right now is considered worse than living under the Taliban.

The third chapter, 'Under Invasion', focuses specifically on the current situation in Afghanistan. Rostami-Povey explains that presently there is no security, no economic development, nor any peace strategies. The Afghan state has focused mostly on militarization rather than healthcare, housing or welfare of the people. While the west continues to enforce its neo-liberal agenda, Afghan women are left to fight two demons; on the one hand, they must stand up against a culture that has traditionally denied them; on the other hand, they must also stand up to western appropriation of who they are and what they need.

The fourth chapter, 'Exile and Identity', focuses on the lives of Afghan women living in Iran, Pakistan, England and the United States. All of these women have experienced the trauma of displacement, identity confusion, racism and marginalization. But many have used these experiences to empower and connect across ethnic, linguistic and regional boundaries. They have also taken advantage of opportunities such as education, and employment, to ameliorate their lives. Moreover, Rostami-Povey suggests that the notion of individualism prevalent in western societies is at odds with what Afghan women value, and thus may push them further towards traditional practices oppressive towards women (p. 124).

The final chapter of the book, 'Challenging Domination', is a discussion of many of the issues Rostami-Povey raises throughout her book. The Afghan State, for example, is seen as continually subjugating the needs of Afghans to imperial interests. Rostami-Povey argues, for example, that the State is further weakened by the presence of foreign organizations. As a result, Afghans have lost faith in their government.

Afghan women: Identity and Invasion comes at a time when there is still so much confusion and misrepresentation about who Afghan women are, what they need or what they want for themselves. This book is a reflection of what many Afghans, including myself, have been feeling and fighting against for years. For many of us, this book is (finally) a sign of hope.

Spogmai Akseer

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