

## Fawzia Afzal-Khan's *Siren Song*: Deconstructing the Self-Image of Pakistani Culture by Presenting Alternative Social Realities

By Nyla Ali Khan

Review of Fawzia Afzal-Khan's *Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan through Its Women Singers* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford UP, 2020). 210 pages.

The severance of India and Pakistan in 1947 politicized not just religious identities but linguistic identities as well. I would argue that in her book *Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan through Its Women Singers*, Fawzia Afzal-Khan explores the constitutive elements of the post-independence sense of the nation. She delineates internal hierarchies entrenched by nationalism in relation to an array of matters: political power, ethnicity, religion, religious prejudice, and other problems permeating the subcontinent.

I would argue that by studying “socio-cultural interventions in the Pakistan polity made by Pakistan’s female singer-citizens” (xviii), Afzal-Khan demonstrates the production of women, particularly Muslim women, not as a universal category but as a socioeconomic and political group within a particular local context.

The reason I found *Siren Song* a fascinating read is because I have underscored, in my previous and current work, that the nation and nationalism that were defined by the politics of the Partition need to be analyzed in order to account for the volcanic eruptions caused by this horrific event.

For instance, the illustrious poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, whom Afzal-Khan has referenced in her book, wrote his account of the fear, sense of loss, and bewilderment that followed in the wake of “The Dawn of Freedom (1947).” In his pain-filled account of the emotional depletion and psychological decrepitude that were the “collateral damages” of the decolonization of India and its subsequent geographical division, Faiz made an attempt to expose, and thus reject, the

nationalist panacea. This panacea, which was designed to lead the physically defaced and psychologically mangled communities to resign themselves to an incomprehensible transformation was deconstructed by the poet.

Afzal-Khan argues that women singers like Noor Jehan sang many of Faiz's poems in order to express an anti-war sentiment and mourning the loss of lives, which was inevitable in war. She believes that by incorporating a Sufi spiritual angel into a war song, Noor Jehan implicitly critiqued rifts that were first brought to the surface in the subcontinent in 1947 as well as the forces of communal violence, which continue to wield their power with unabated vigor even today.

In the context of these historical ruptures, the insistence on challenging a nationalist rhetoric that prevents a nation from performing a critical examination of its culture, social customs, and gender divisions is rendered more urgent by Faiz's poems and Noor Jehan's songs.

In post-Partition India, Urdu found itself abandoned by its wealthy and regal patrons of the pre-Partition era, who were reeling under the disorienting effects of geographical dislocation.

Historically, the Partition of 1947 did fragment the writing community as well as the poetic community by redistributing its members into two separate territorial nations.

While reading the chapter on Malika Pukhraj, I recalled meeting her in Kashmir in 1988. The illustrious singer was originally from Urdu Bazaar in Jammu. She was an integral part of Maharaja Hari Singh's court until he fled the State, and she immigrated to Pakistan in the aftermath of the Partition.

After spending a few days in Jammu, which was a trip down memory lane for her, Malika Pukhraj spent a couple of days in Kashmir during her short trip to the former State in 1988. She regaled us with stories of the time she had spent at the palace, now the Lalit Palace Hotel, as part of Maharaja Hari Singh's court. I requested her to sing Hafeez Jalandari's "Abhi To Main Jawan Hoon" for my cousins and me over dinner. And she was kind enough to indulge us. Malika Pukhraj sang for us in her deep voice with her elaborate gestures, which was her signature style.

In *Siren Song*, Afzal-Khan observes, “. . . it is the musical arts of the courtesan [Malika Pukhraj], ranging from the development of voracious reading habits (an important part of courtesan culture), to her growing self-confidence as she becomes a wage earner of high caliber and capacity for her family---that make her a desirable companion to educated men like the Maharaja (who spent most of his youth in England)” (12).

One of the significant consequences of the Partition was the migration of Urdu writers of Muslim origin to Pakistan. This is one of the unfortunate calamities of India's historical past whose religio-cultural tensions continue today to sharpen divisions along communal lines in both nation-states. In independent India and Pakistan, the violent backlash after the routing of British colonialism and the exploitation of divided communal sentiments by political and religious leaders evoked divisive militancy in the garb of patriotism. It was in that polarized environment that “. . . precolonial memories of a polyglot culture, where musical philosophies and gendered performativities could not be reduced to an Islamic or Hindu ethos, were kept alive by female singers like Malika Pukhraj” (Afzal-Khan 18).

I would argue that in the modern world, religious and cultural differences are fostered by many nation-states in their efforts to construct homogeneous subjects of state. But, Afzal-Khan reminds us, singers like Noor Jehan, Malika Pukhraj, Roshan Ara Begum, Abida Parveen, Deeyah, and Nazia Hasan recognized literary and musical forms that contested every attempt to homogenize Pakistani culture. These acclaimed singers deconstructed the self-image of Pakistani culture by including voices that presented alternative social realities. Furthermore, they blurred the distinction between the poetic and the prosaic.

I would point out that in creating the essentialist categories of the “Muslim Woman” and the “Pakistani Woman,” we forget that culture inscribes a wide range of experiences which centralizing institutions attempt to render invisible and homogeneous. But women singers in Pakistan are positioned in relation to their own class and cultural identities; their own relations to the West; their interpretations of religious law; and their concepts of the role of women and men in contemporary society. Abida Parveen, for instance, “embodies the blurring of gender and class hierarchies that equally blurs the separation of earthly love from divine love, the secular from the realm of the sacred, and the so-called Muslim East from the secular West” (63).

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The rich trajectories of these women singers make it clear to me that during the Islamist regime of Zia-ul-Haq and the ramifications of the fanatical ideology, which he held sacred, these women singers had the sagacity, courage, and spiritual anchor to make interventions into a patriarchal history from their particular locations.