

## Fawzia Afzal-Khan's *Lahore With Love*

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*Lahore With Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends Pakistani-Style.* Fawzia Afzal-Khan. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010. 176 pages. ISBN: 978-0815609247-8156-0924-7.

“A man’s memory is bound to be a distortion of his past in accordance with his present interests, and the most faithful autobiography is likely to mirror less what a man was than what he has become,” says Fawn M. Brodie and nothing describes Fawzia Afzal-Khan’s commendable memoir, *Lahore With Love*, more aptly. Afzal-Khan grew up in Pakistan, attended a Roman Catholic school and then Kinnaird College for Women before leaving for the US for her Ph.D. degree where she later accepted a job. A Professor at Montclair State University specializing in feminist and postcolonial studies, Fawzia Afzal-Khan is also a poet and an activist for Muslim women’s movements. Consequently, she brings in all these facets of her identity into her memoir, making *Lahore with Love* much more thought-provoking than a simple recounting of her past days in Pakistan and a ‘her-story’ of female friendships. She looks back at her life in Pakistan from her present position of a poet-writer-activist, critically scrutinizing each phase of her growing up in a newly independent country transitioning from the vestiges of colonialism to Islamic fundamentalism. Her girlfriends, each with a distinct personality and an equally diverse life story, portray the sundry plights of Pakistani women as they traverse the passages of girlhood to womanhood in the changing face of the country. *Lahore With Love* is a grand narrative on fifty years of Pakistan’s history through a lens which is overwhelmingly female—both feminine and feminist.

Born in the late 1950s, only a decade after the inception of the modern Pakistan, Afzal-Khan narrates the turmoil of a nation grappling with its religious identity, a colonial hangover, a civil war and numerous military coups. The society, especially the upper-middle class that Fawzia (as a character in the book) belonged to, was fraught with the paradoxes of colonial modernity and Islamic conservatism. So, while it was a fad to send the girls to Catholic convent schools to render them more marriageable with their ‘English’ education, these schools were nevertheless

segregated in sync with Muslim decorum. Afzal-Khan recounts numerous other instances of such paradoxes that characterized the Pakistani middle class whereby Westernized lifestyles coexisted with 'fanatical extremism,' and liberalism for women's education and homosexuality contradicted the racism people showed for the East Pakistanis. In terms of women's position, however, the society remained unanimously patriarchal in restricting them primarily to the domestic role.

The motif of segregation, which resonates throughout the book, appears less of a constriction and more of a catalyst for an alternative female space with its independent dynamics. As they grew up together with the same patriarchal restrictions and the same romantic fantasies about men, went through the same discoveries of their adolescence together, and shared their careers up to a point, the numerous experiences of Fawzia's passage from girlhood to adulthood are shaped and shared only by her girlfriends. As Fawzia recounts: "It is not surprising that same-sex relationships, especially for women, acquire deep, long-lasting emotional resonance. For me, growing up as the eldest daughter of a middle-class urban Pakistani family, girlfriends became a lifeline supplying dreams of possibilities..." (5). The names that recur in her memoir are those of her childhood friends Samina, Hajira, Saira and Madina, each holding a distinct appeal for Fawzia. Samina and Saira embodied the ideal femininity that Fawzia's adolescent self longed for but lacked, especially her enchantment with Samina's physicality often bordering on a homoerotic attraction. Samina, a teenage girl with a lover, is Fawzia's first exposure to such illicit love and its drastic consequences in the form of honor killing driven by class-based conservative Islamism. Saira, too, embodied the sexualized adolescent female body that both attracted and enthralled Fawzia. Saira was also the first one to get married, the first one to recount the experiences of the tabooed discourse of 'sex' and then to gradually lapse into the banality of domesticity with a shapeless body, three children, and a wandering husband. Fawzia shares the closest bond with Hajira who also hails from the same socio-economic background, though often Fawzia looks up to Hajira for the greater liberties she is allowed by her more 'progressive' parents. Emotionally too, the two girls feel closest to each other till Hajira is swept off by the communist discourse of her pseudo-intellectual husband, tragically ending in her suicide due to depression. Madina is the odd one out in the lot: not conforming to the norms of a traditional 'respectable' girl, she embodies an unrestrained female sexuality bordering on insanity and a fierce feminist aggression. A complete contrast to her otherwise, Fawzia relates to her through the activism of her street theatre.

While these characters who dominate her memoir matter to Afzal-Khan personally, they are also crucial to the ideological tenor of the book. The political overwhelms the personal in the memoir as Afzal-Khan critically exposes the

fundamentalist side of Pakistan and its gradual downslide to religious conservatism. An uneasy topic for most Pakistanis, she fearlessly invokes and condemns the atrocities done to the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during the civil war, asserting: “it would be decades before we, West Pakistanis would acknowledge the dastardly role of the Pakistani army in looting, killing, raping our brethren on the other side of India” (19). However, she is forthright and clear-sighted in her judgment: while she emphatically expresses her predilection for Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s socialist politics, she also candidly idicts him for of amassing personal wealth, for eliminating of his critics, and for encouraging religious fundamentalism (2). With this clear-sightedness she sees through the parochialism of those people who are closest to her, be it her mother’s racism toward the Shias or her girlfriends’ gradual conversion into religious fanatics. Her mother’s hatred of the Shias startles her to a realization of the “rot that had set in within the fabric of the Pakistani society, deliberately cultivated by the military dictator Zia-ul-Haq” (82). More disillusioning for her is, however, the transformation of her childhood friends who have now internalized the discourse of an Islamic revolution. She vainly tries to argue with these friends and relatives who have turned into faithful followers of a religious propaganda, ruefully realizing that her “best friends have become religious zealots in a way I could not have anticipated when we were giggly girls together” (65). The only friend she relates to ideologically is Madina, who, in spite of her eccentric ways, is an activist addressing women’s issues in Pakistan through her alternative theatre performances, which Afzal-Khan also promotes in her activism.

Afzal-Khan passionately engages in a discussion against the gradual prominence of religious fundamentalism in Pakistan, devoting a substantial space in her memoir to either dismantle the logic of such discourse or to render it risible through humor. Particularly ludicrous is the description of the women’s wing of militant Islamism led by Umm Hassan and the her group of fighter girls, humorously nicknamed as “Chicks with Sticks,” who have shot to international fame when their pictures were released on the Internet, wearing “black ninja outfits and wielding tall bamboo sticks” (129). Yet, with an unbiased assessment Afzal-Khan refrains from dismissing the group completely, admitting that “paradoxically, Umm Hassan seems a stauncher women’s libber. . . , than any “westernized” Pakistani woman I’d ever met—including myself” (141).

The memoir stands out in such impartiality of judgment and a critical awareness of the author’s own Westernized position. More often than not, Afzal-Khan turns the mirror to herself, commenting on her own problematic location as an American academic commenting on Pakistan. The author is constantly aware of the privileges of her Western location, in contrast to her locally bound girlfriends, and dedicates the memoir to them in a guilt of privilege: “It is through the writing

of our shared herstories that I am finally learning the humility that could have saved that mythical flyer (Icarus)” (8). The apologetic tone follows in her description of the honor killings in Pakistan and in her honest confessions of manipulating her “Muslim womanhood to make (her) way up the U.S. academic ladder”(10). While Afzal-Khan implicitly acknowledges her rational vision to her training in US academia, she also exemplifies Spivak’s notion of the metropolitan feminist who is aware of her responsibilities towards the emancipatory struggles of other women outside the domain of Western metropolitan concerns. However, the consciousness of her intellectual superiority occasionally leads to a slight egotistic strain in the memoir; nonetheless a memoir is, after all, a narcissistic project by its very definition!

Moving on to the narrative style of the book, as Carole Stone asserts in the Foreword, *Lahore with Love* is more complex than a memoir. A poet herself, Afzal-Khan muses on her own creative position with reference to other American memoir writers, focusing on the form as well as the content. The memoir also takes various shapes in terms of its literary forms, ranging from verses, parodies, stream of consciousness narratives, along with the confessional tone of an autobiography. At other times she records the history of Pakistan with academic formality, using the detailed footnotes to complement her argument with factual evidence. Particularly striking in narrative style is the chapter ‘Blood and Girls,’ which transcends the prose narrative, achieving a poetic exuberance of expression. Afzal-Khan blends her experiences of bull fighting in Spain and the procession of Muharrum through the metaphor of blood and violence, making it a beautifully crafted creative piece.

The memoir is also refreshing in its humor, which takes shape in the playful parodies as well as in the mild sarcasm of her political commentaries, giving the memoir a pleasant and enjoyable tenor. Though revelatory and critical in her tone, Afzal-Khan’s voice never becomes devastatingly spiteful. Instead, the memoir reads like a commentary by a woman who can see through and reproach the flaws of her country, but nevertheless feels connected to it. The memoir finally becomes characteristic of its genre as it ends with musings on Afzal-Khan’s self quest—“the ever-multiplying fissures of a selfhood fractured into so many roles, performances of identity...” (144) that haunt this multidimensional woman and her brilliant narrative.