

SONIA AHSAN-TIRMIZI. *PIOUS PERIPHERIES: RUNAWAY WOMEN IN POST-TALIBAN AFGHANISTAN.* STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2021, 256 P. ISBN: 9781503614710

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Set in post-2001 Afghanistan, *Pious peripheries* provides a characterful account of womanhood in between the spaces of religious piety, the label of 'promiscuity', and ideals of freedom. Through poetry, wilful decisions and cunning tactics, the women of the *khana-yi aman* (shelter) subvert the moral agendas imposed on them by men, ideals of chastity and God. This work documents the hardship of Afghan women's daily lives, morally shadowed by an omnipresent Taliban and reveals an ethnographer capable of effortlessly switching between authorial presence and effacement to give voice to brave, pious women.

The first and second chapters set the scene: a shelter outside Kabul which provides refuge to women who have run away from their husbands and families. No woman has the same story at the shelter: some are fleeing physical and sexual abuse, some want an education and some simply do not want to marry – all of them have made the decision to run away and await court decisions about their cases. In the Kabul imaginary, the shelter is seen as a brothel; it follows that any woman headed there is labelled as 'promiscuous' and unchaste. Ahsan-Tirmizi aims to explore how women inhabit this label and use it to their advantage.

The concept of 'promiscuity' is thus explored in chapter 3, through the singing of *landay*, Pashtun poems which explicitly express feelings of lust, desire, sorrow and death. Through the performance of these emancipatory poems, Ahsan suggests that runaway women inhabit a 'promiscuous modern' self (p. 78), as they root their poetry in the norms of Islam and Pashtun identities while emancipating themselves by singing sexually explicit sentiments that violate honour. This idea of 'promiscuous self' is a way to bridge the sometimes complementary and contradictory positions that women inhabit: *landay* is a careful weaving of piety and promiscuity and a mirror for the complex power dynamics which shape womanhood.

Chapter four delves into the Taliban's place as a parallel, 'shadow' government in Afghanistan since 2001, and further defends that they have played, and still play a major role in shaping the rules of ethical behaviour for pious women. Women should not laugh in public, women should not go to school, women should sexually satisfy their husbands before even satisfying God. Adultery is a crime against the social order – and is punishable by death. When women's bodies are the Taliban's vehicle for social obedience, the risk of being seen as promiscuous is high, and running away could easily result in death. These women are not simply subjugated, they actively defy the status quo in their own way.

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In the fifth and sixth chapters, Ahsan-Tirmizi reviews an impressive body of Islamic texts to show how notions of piety and chastity are deeply entrenched within Islamic history, both local (Pashto) and global (across the Muslim world). This chapter highlights that an understanding of identity is indissociable from historical processes, and that womanhood cannot be studied without understanding the scriptures, the legends and the laws that inform ideals of honour and closeness to God.

Pious peripheries reminds us that a submission to religious authority is not necessarily subjugation, and that even the harshest conditions of existence allow space for individuality. Ahsan uses Foucault's later work on power and the ethical making of a subject to analyse the women's careful weaving of patriarchal rule and emancipation: one is not always resisting a structure directly, but rather inhabiting the norms in place to create new possibilities. For example, when singing *landay*, women often refer to the veil, which is indissociable from the feminine moral self in Islam. Simultaneously, *landay* are often on the themes of desire and lust: veiling which is associated with sexual obedience is thus inverted through poetry. This in turn shows that an understanding of womanhood is a constant negotiation between promiscuity and piety rather than a resistance to top-down power dynamics. Ahsan-Tirmizi further reminds us that the runaway women do not condemn the norms holding their lives in place: they accept the stoning of women who have committed adultery and support the fact that men can have up to four wives. Liberal feminists would probably disagree, but Ahsan-Tirmizi makes a strong case: the women of the shelter are not subjugated, their ideas of freedom are simply tied to different histories and notions of honour.

Pious peripheries forces the reader to engage with these women's hard lives in a humbling way: the point is not for us to be outraged at the shackles of patriarchy, but to witness how women are able to navigate the harshest of circumstances. At times, this can be quite challenging. Descriptions of domestic violence and repeated sexual abuse push us to approach this monograph analytically rather than emotionally. For many women in the world, this ethnography's absence of clear political stance can be seen as reinforcing structures of oppression. The author herself does not know how to reconcile this: how do we achieve a universal sisterhood without flattening difference?

Ahsan is clear though, she is not retelling these stories for the purpose of a war to be waged through Muslim women's bodies. She is not interested in talking about these women through the goals of Western feminism. She seeks instead to create an independent space in academia where Muslim women can have a conversation without narratives being thwarted, or used as vehicles for Western political agendas. *Pious peripheries* recalls that the aesthetically pleasing narratives of Western saviourism have long acted as a justification for the invasion and destruction of Afghanistan. Ahsan-Tirmizi's fieldwork reveals that nothing has changed for Afghan women since 2001; the Taliban never ceased holding control over moral codes. Despite the hardship, violence and loss this hold has caused and continues to cause, the women of the *khana-yi aman* are able to express themselves within corrupt systems and create their own ideals of chastity, care and femininity. While this book will perhaps stir human rights activists and ruffle the feathers of anthropologists nostalgic for cross-cultural comparisons, the possibility for an independent and academic conversation around feminism, piety and freedom is not only timely, but necessary.

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