

Place and Postcolonial Ecofeminism: Pakistani Women's Literary and Cinematic Fictions

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Many of the South Asian nations were created out of ethnic and religious discrimination. For example, the 1947 India-Pakistan Partition took place along religious lines where Hindus and Sikhs migrated to India, and Muslims to Pakistan. Often, postcolonial theory on the 1947 Partition examines connections between violence, the woman, and the nation (Das 2007; Menon and Bhasin 1998). However, what does it mean to be a Pakistani woman in the post-Partition era? How do such women complicate political borders and a rigid national identity? Shazia Rahman explores these questions in her book, *Place and Postcolonial Ecofeminism: Pakistani Women's Literary and Cinematic Fictions*.

Rahman's study discusses the fictional portrayals of Pakistani women and opens up to a new understanding of such identities. The book offers insights into the ways in which Pakistani women cultivate affective ties with water, land, and nonhuman animals within particular places. This form of place-based identity challenges Pakistan's Islamic nationalism which foregrounds religion as the most important signifier of national belonging. The author discusses the nuances of women's place-based identities through the lens of postcolonial ecofeminism. Such a lens studies the relations between society, environment, and women who come from different caste, class, and (inter)religious backgrounds. A "scholar of environmental humanities" (2), who believes that postcolonial literature needs to focus more on discourses about environmental problems and its inseparability from social justice and gender issues, Rahman contends that "[i]nterdisciplinary analytical work on social and environmental justice is sorely needed given the increasingly stark ecological risks faced by many, especially the most vulnerable—nonhuman animals, women, children, and minorities—in South Asia and around the world" (3). Through the examination of post-Partition Pakistan, this book fills significant gaps in scholarship on environment and social justice. Pakistan merits more discussion within postcolonial literature because of the singularity of its historical transition from colonialism to nationalism: its significant geopolitical shifts affected women who are both oppressed and haunted by nationalism.

Rahman analyzes films and novels that tell the stories of women who carry a complex sense of their selfhoods as they navigate through places both within and beyond Pakistan's borders. The book engages with scholars of postcolonialism, feminism, and ecocriticism—such as Ursula Heise, Rob Nixon, Paul Lindholdt, Ayesha Jalal, and Ananya Kabir. In the first chapter, the author examines Sabiha Sumar's 2003 film, *Khamosh Pani* (*Silent Waters*). The chapter focuses on the protagonist Ayesha's harrowing relation with Punjab's waters. Her traumatic past reveals how she mingles two religions in one body, thus complicating the narrative of religious (Islamic) nationalism and belonging in late twentieth-century Pakistan. Such a narrative utilizes Islam as a political means of oppressing women and minorities. The author interprets how water, like women, undergoes violence during the 1947 Partition. Water, for Rahman, also symbolizes the film's portrayal of arbitrary fluid boundaries.

The concept of fluid boundaries lingers into the book's second chapter on *Ramchand Pakistani*, a 2008 film directed by Mehreen Jabbar. The film portrays the Thar Desert, a bioregion that transcends Indian and Pakistani territories. The author develops a sustained conversation with Paul Lindholdt, Rob Nixon, and Ursula Heise about the ambiguities of bioregionalism. On the one hand, bioregionalism signifies one's connection to the land while on the other it excludes immigrants and indigenous peoples, thus becoming a xenophobic concept. The author argues that "understanding Pakistan entails a perspective that is both place based and postcolonial" (56). Rahman offers a convincing argument by drawing on the importance of place/bioregion and intersectional identity in *Ramchand Pakistani*. The film depicts Champa, a marginalized Hindu Dalit (low-caste) woman farmer in severe poverty. A wealthy landlord oppresses Champa who refuses to renounce her farmed land and migrate elsewhere. Her caste and cultural identity challenge Pakistan as a majority Muslim nation. Additionally, one's affective ties with place over nation is evident when Champa's husband Shankar, and son Ramchand "consistently refer to Bhimra, their village in the desert, as their home" (59). The film showcases how one's place-based belonging criminalizes them as "others" on both sides of the India-Pakistan border.

Rahman traces this idea of complex belonging throughout her book. Chapter three is about blurry pasts and ghostly sites in Sorayya Khan's novel, *Noor* (2006). Khan tells the story about a (West) Pakistani girl, Noor, whose drawings of 1971 East Pakistan trigger the memories of her mother, Sajida. Rahman not only examines the affects related to an imagined memory of East Pakistan's landscape, but illustrates Pakistan's forgotten eastern wing. According to Ananya Kabir, "in Pakistan, it was losing both the war [of 1971] and its eastern wing that made forgetting East Pakistan seemingly imperative for the

nation to return to normal” (61). Kabir’s contention is enriched by the ecocritical framework provided by Rahman. The author discusses how Noor’s ecofeminism is apparent through her drawings of East Pakistan’s land and water that unwrite such collective nationalist forgetting. Noor develops an ecofeminist solidarity with Sajida by (magically) excavating her mother’s fragmented past and reopening intergenerational wounds that connect traumatized humans to a spectral land.

The fourth and fifth chapters shed light on the global. In chapter four, Rahman uses the term “eco-cosmopolitanism” to confirm her point about race, gender, and class being inseparable from globalization as well as the environment. The author studies Uzma Aslam Khan’s 2003 novel, *Trespassing*, to analyze how the characters develop a Pakistani eco-cosmopolitanism that enables local and global connections to emerge. The novel, argues Rahman, achieves this by narrating the characters’ relationships with the sea, places, and nonhuman animals. The chapter provides a compelling discussion about the novel’s character Dia, a Muslim woman in Pakistan who likes to observe silkworms. The author connects Dia’s analysis with Partha Chatterjee’s concept of the “new woman” (131) to foreground her idea of the new Muslim eco-cosmopolitan woman. The final chapter draws on migration and displacement. The chapter explores Kamila Shamsie’s novel, *Burnt Shadows* (2009) to describe how multiple characters are displaced from various places across the world. The book comes full circle in this chapter as it marks the oppression against humans and the environment encountered in the first four chapters.

The book touches on the 1970 Bhola cyclone and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. However, the study would have benefited from a more explicit connection between the cyclone and the war. One wonders whether the cyclone played an important (yet unrecognized) role in leading up to the war. Discussing the nationalism-environment link in the context of the cyclone and the war would add to Rahman’s strong discourse on land and nation. In particular, *Noor’s* depiction of East Pakistan’s landscape seems to illustrate a double ghostly past of both the war and the cyclone, which can be brought more evidently into conversation. This observation only affirms the importance of this book as it fosters questions and dialogue. Rahman’s book will be a useful addition to postcolonial studies, gender and feminist research, ecocritical theory and literature, as well as media and film courses. Moreover, the book’s accessible prose appeals to readers outside the academic community, who feel connected (perhaps emotionally) to conversations about displacement, loss, and love.

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