

Book Review

Rahman, Shazia., *Place and Postcolonial Ecofeminism: Pakistani Women's Literary and Cinematic Fictions*. 226pp., University of Nebraska Press 2019

Prof Cara Cilano¹

¹ Department of English, Michigan State University, USA

E-mail: cilano@msu.edu

Published: February 2020

The land itself poses a central question to the idea of Pakistan that gained geographical territory in 1947: namely, can long-standing relations to the land abide through the violent political upheavals of the subcontinent's partitions and their concomitant legacies? Shazia Rahman's *Place and Postcolonial Ecofeminism* addresses this question via a critical disposition that centers the environment and crosshatches this focus with gender, religious identity, and class/caste concerns. The book's attempts to pull these threads together derive from Rahman's identification as an "ecocriti[c] and environmental humanis[t...], who [is] interested in issues of inequality and justice, and who [is] concerned about Pakistan [and] understand[s] that social justice and environmental justice cannot and should not be separated" (172). Rahman argues that a place-based approach to literary and cinematic fictions by women allows for a theorisation of "non-nationalist attachments to place" (3), a necessary move in current conversations about Pakistani identity, whose default is a paradigm of nationalist belonging with all its attendant biases, injustices, and exclusions.

In making this move, though, Rahman acknowledges how the particulars of Pakistani history and cultural traditions can impede attachments women especially form to place. These include a patriarchal Islam and, arguably, colonial vestiges as they manifest themselves in land ownership practices and laws (3). With reference to climate science and economic research, Rahman contends that, even in the face of these obstacles, "women are still the most concerned and most likely to act when faced with food and water insecurity" (4). These historical, economic, and climate science references situate Rahman's broader contribution most substantially in ecocritical and environmental studies conversations. Indeed, she organises her literary and cinematic analyses by critical methods and concepts borrowed from environmental studies: eco-cosmopolitanism; bioregionalism; vernacular landscapes; and animal studies.

Chapter one employs a distinctly feminist eco-cosmopolitanism in its analysis of Sabiha Sumar's 2003 film, *Khamosh Pani*. Rahman calls attention to the film's tiered chronology to trace the impact of decolonisation through partition and the new iterations of global capitalism that followed. Specifically, Rahman highlights how the main character's gender and religious identities connect her to the Punjab even as the political vagaries of post-partition realities refuse to acknowledge her belonging as legitimate. Rahman's second chapter on Mehreen Jabbar's 2008 film *Ramchand Pakistani* uses the concept of bioregionalism, alongside gender and religious identities, to trouble the force of national boundaries that, nonetheless, have the power to upend lives.

The book's remaining chapters focus on novels: Sorayya Khan's 2006 *Noor*, Uzma Aslam Khan's 2003 *Trespassing*, and Kamila Shamsie's 2009 *Burnt Shadows*, respectively. The third chapter on *Noor* centers ekphrastic practice—the description of a work of visual art in literature—in its deployment of vernacular landscape as an ecocritical concept. The visual elements of the novel crystallise localised specifics of time and place—East Pakistan, 1970-71—to solidify connections lost due to powerful external forces.

Rahman returns to eco-cosmopolitanism in her analysis of *Trespassing*, a novel that takes Karachi as its place. The novel's inclusion of non-human animals allows Rahman to refine this term within a specifically Pakistani context, thereby addressing a critical skepticism that eco-cosmopolitanism does not take into account the material realities of local places even as the term facilitates an analysis of how local environmental concerns interrelate with much broader dynamics. The book's final chapter borrows from animal studies to argue that the animalisation that occurs in Shamsie's novel "helps us grasp the ways in which [the novel's] critique of nationalism among humans is embedded in and inseparable from its resistance to humanism" (20). By taking on both

forms of discourse, Rahman argues, this animalisation expands the reach of environmental critique beyond Pakistan, just as Shamsie's novel spans continents and historical planes.

Rahman's introduction insists that a place-based approach requires a new kind of reading, one that centers representations of place no matter plot or character, a central claim in ecocritical studies:

As ecocritics, we must attend to the environment in our readings regardless of the perceived environmentalism of the writers and filmmakers we study. Even though the fictions discussed here, both cinematic and literary, are not overtly environmental and activist, an ecocritical lens brings to light new readings that draw attention to environmental ways of belonging in Pakistan. To foreground the environment, [her study] delves expansively and against the grain of the featured authors and filmmakers. (16)

The analyses of the films *Khamosh Pani* and *Ramchand Pakistani*, as well as of Sorayya Khan's novel *Noor*, illustrate most vividly how to undertake the new reading practice Rahman advocates. For instance, her examination of *Ramchand Pakistani* as representing a bioregional approach to belonging hinges in part upon the film's depiction of the oxymoronic weighty abstraction of the national border bisecting the Thar Desert. Rahman includes a screenshot of one of the central characters, a young boy, inadvertently crossing the border from Pakistan into India as he walks between evenly spaced concrete markers. There is no wall, no change in topography, no signs signaling the political boundary. Though the film's viewer understands the significance of the boy's movement, the very visual nature of film as a medium insistently displays the very sameness of the desert on both sides of the border, underscoring how the boy's sense of belonging would not be disrupted by the material place itself (57).

Of course, cinematic representations rely on the visual and, thus, may more readily encourage the reading practice Rahman advocates. Rahman's examination of S. Khan's *Noor* provides a useful example of how to practice this approach when reading a literary text. Built tightly around the concept of ekphrasis, Rahman contends that the visuality inherent to the title character's artwork interrupts the story's ability to narrate authoritatively the places the paintings represent (96-97). Significantly, these places are in East Pakistan after the devastating 1970 Bhola cyclone and during the 1971 war with West Pakistan. The places the paintings depict dislodge crucial memories for the title character's mother and (adoptive) grandfather, memories suppressed by shame, trauma, and broader forces of cultural and political amnesia. Resurfaced, these memories prompt the negation and revision of previously dominant family narratives. Without falling too far into the family romance mode, Rahman argues that these negations and revisions help illustrate the dangers

and expense of using 'other' places for resource extraction, a practice that Pakistan continued in Balochistan long after losing one half of itself in 1971, as well as the possibility of recovering from such practices.

As a welcome infusion of a new and urgent critical voice into Pakistani literary criticism, *Place and Postcolonial Ecofeminism* makes its most significant contribution to ecocriticism through its focus on the environments of Pakistan. For scholars and students working in Pakistan Studies, a deeper engagement with historical and current events would enhance Rahman's analyses. For instance, chapter three's gesture toward the realities and consequences of resource extraction and waste disposal in Balochistan merits greater attention, especially if we accept the argument that fiction helps us better understand and engage the injustices in our midst.