

## Book Review

Afzal-Khan, Fawzia. *Siren Songs: Understand Pakistan Through Its Women Singers*. 252pp. Oxford University Press 2020.

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At first glance, as yet another book on the women singers of Pakistan, Fawzia-Afzal Khan's *Siren Song* does not excite. Life stories of the country's notable singers and performers – Malika Pukhraj, Roshan Ara Begum, Noor Jehan, Reshma, Nazia Hassan and others discussed in the text, are neither new nor unfamiliar – local and indeed international readerships are as aware of their trials and tribulations in pursuit of their art as they are of the official unease of a self-designated 'Muslim state' to which the performing arts, particularly music and dance are anathema. So, what is it that makes *Siren Song* not just an interesting but also – as Pakistan faces another slide towards religious extremism under its current dispensation – a thought-provoking read that is very much of the moment?

The answer to this, and indeed the pleasurable quotient of the book, is to be found in Afzal-Khan's stated aim and approach. The first is to provide readers with a sense of Pakistan's cultural history from a perspective that is different from both official state narratives and the orientalist accounts of 'oppressed Muslim womanhood' so dear to western media and incidentally also to mainstream white feminists and global super powers in pursuit of self-aggrandising agendas in Muslim lands. The second lies in her utilisation of women singers as key heuristic site to develop her reading of the relationship between the singers and a self-declared Muslim state to which they belong, and where their struggle takes place. Her use of a cultural materialist feminist perspective enables her to trace the ways women singers negotiate their art and "create cultural representations of gendered identities" (xviii) that raise serious questions about Pakistan's social norms and cultural policies. In this regard, the cross-generational selection of singers, ranging from Malika Pukhraj to disco-queen Nazia Hassan and the Coke Studio generation, whose lives span the nation's life, locates the narrative historically. This draws attention to the ways a religion-based state ideology influenced cultural policy. At the same time it shows how the two combined with patriarchal

family norms and notions of middle-class respectability inflected by the shifting vicissitudes of politicised Islam, impacted on Pakistan's musical scene, on the lives and careers of women singers and on the national ethos and psyche.

The break between earlier writings on women singers and *Siren Song* lies also in Afzal-Khan's choice of analytical tools; in her use (89-90) of the microhistorical approach<sup>1</sup> and Homi Bhabha's definition of Minority Discourse.<sup>2</sup> The former draws attention to the inherent contradictions of normative systems, to the fragmentation and plurality of viewpoints that make all systems open and fluid, even as it demonstrates the hole in mainstream understanding and the subjective nature of the discursive field; the latter "acknowledges the status of national culture – and the people – as a ... performative space" (89) where contending forces come into play. (xxxiii)

By positing women singers as 'outliers' (89), and placing on the same plane official narratives, policy documents, academic treatises on culture, women's biographies and the inexactitude of oral narratives, *Siren Song* sets up the terrain of two separate yet interrelated struggles even as it draws attention to the gaps and fissures in the stories they tell. On the one hand, there is the struggle of women challenging the clichés and stereotypes of licit and illicit behaviour in a society that curtails their agency and violates the integrity of their art at every juncture; on the other, of the travails of a newly formed ideological nation state determined to strip the discursive field of the signs and symbols of the land's non-Muslim past in the interests of Islamic singularity.

Both are near impossible tasks, and jointly and severally the tone and texture of the text, the elisions and absences around which these struggles are constituted, bring with them an abiding sense of enforced silences and things left unsaid. Recalling Judith Butler's definition of performance as a type of enactment where the appearance of what is imagined and

publicly stated may be mistaken for a sign of its inherent or internal truth,<sup>3</sup> the clichés and tropes that carry the women singers' stories and yoke their profession as singers to normative respectability, and the state's quest for singularity in a pluralist society, grant them a sense of masquerade – of performance – that deflects attention from that which it hides, even as it draw attention to that which must not be said.

The crisscross of voices that people *Siren Song's* text give an edge to the women singers' struggle to uphold their art while bidding for an equal stake in the opposing demands of middle-class respectability inflected by the post-Islamisation politics of piety. At the same time, they give credence to their impulse to divert attention from their real or putative links with the professional world of musical gharanas and their class-caste associations. In a stroke of unintended irony, the consequent to and fro of acquiescence and denial, compliance and resistance that patterns women's speech, resonates with the familiar trope of the courtesan with the soul of a harem-bound housewife popularised by Indo-Pakistani cinema particularly Bollywood's 'Umrao Jan Ada' and 'Pakeeza' even as it blurs the distinction between the illicit pleasures of the courtesans' quarter and the austere discipline and rigour of musical gharanas.

This may verge on melodrama – or even comedy – but the fragmentation and plurality of voices, the clichés invoked, the similarity and sameness of the repetitions and denials, highlight the gaps and fissures in mainstream moralities and hint at the presence of complex realities behind the mask of words. Thus Pukhraj, with her rigorous schooling in classical music and her position as a high wage earner able to look after her family, who assumes her "rightful place in the pantheon of Pakistan's 'great' female singers post-Partition" (15), takes recourse to the familiar trope of 'destiny foretold at birth' by a holy man (8) (as incidentally do Roshan Ara Begum and Suraiya Multanikar) to justify her art; emphasises that the first song she learned was a "devotional hymn to God and his saints" (10) and opts for marriage that "confers the status of 'respectability' on a woman, especially to one associated with singing" (19). Though Pukhraj proudly claims her status as singer, her voice is countered – though not contradicted, by her daughter Tahira Syed's: "My mother was a very private person ... She was very protective of (my father's) family and his name ... that is how she brought us all up. ... she came to singing by way of a Muharrum procession in Jammu, ... (My mother's parents) were all farmers, they never had anything to do with music ..." (141-142). Thus also Roshanara Begum: trained to sing in the Kirana gharana of music and acclaimed for her mastery over raag (24) but who had to take the passive aggressive recourse to depression before being allowed to perform publicly and that too under her husband's vigilant eye, stresses his love for music, states that yes, she was prevented from singing by her husband and his family, but no, she eventually managed to get permission to continue with her career (26); and the middle-class Nazia Hassan who grew up in England, read law at London University, released five albums and sold 65 million records worldwide, speaks of her husband's "very conservative family", and affirms her

allegiance to respectability politics by giving greater importance to her philanthropic work than to her music, which "is fine if pursued as a 'side' interest ... not when pursued for money and fame ...".

That Noor Jehan and Reshma are free of such circumlocutions may be attributed to their difference of class and social location. Unlike the singers who married into respectability or moved away from their earlier affiliations with musical gharanas, neither Noor Jehan, who came from a family of small-town musicians, began her professional life as a child actor, married first, film director Shaukat Hussain Rizvi and later her much younger fellow actor Ejaz Durrani, was loved by audiences across political divides and won acclaim as Malika-e-Tarranum; nor Reshma, unlettered, itinerant and without social pretensions, who travelled across borders from Rajasthan to Sindh with her banjara family, whose voice was 'discovered' by a member of Radio Pakistan at the urs of Laal Shahbaz Qalandar, and who used self-mockery and irreverent laughter to puncture the pretensions of the educated classes, were under any real compulsion to deny their profession, their art or their roots. It would appear that respectability politics are invoked mainly when 'outlier' women transgress class-caste boundaries and threaten middle-class sanctities.

In delineating the ways in which state policy inflected by a literalist Islam reinforced mainstream respectability politics and constricted the space for women singers, the text provides insights into the potentially divisive and dangerous potential of a self-conflicted cultural policy premised on the notion of religious singularity and designed, not to bring together the diverse peoples of the new land through a sense of shared identity, but to insist upon their break with the pluralism and rich diversity of their non-Muslim past. That this has not been easy is borne out by the similarities between the women singers' attempts to practise their art while excising all reference to their professional roots, and the state's attempts to promote culture as a 'way of life' and marker of national identity, while forcibly cutting itself off from its own roots. Significantly, the strategies and stratagems employed by the state – the pattern of affirmation and denial – are similar to those employed by the women singers, as is the sense of masquerade that goes with it.

Thus music and the performing arts, seen as antithetical to Islam, are denigrated and the overly Hindu roots of classical raag are looked at askance, but Hamd, Naat, Salaam, Marsia and Qawalli, based on the very same raags, are kosher. Official acclaim is given to Noor Jehan as the 'Daughter of the Nation' for her nationalist 'taranas', but the Punjab University's Department of Music is closed down and musical programmes on television that involve women are banned as part of the Islamisation agenda; Roshan Ara Begum is constrained to conjoin her singing with devotional practice and strip her renditions of their Hindu content, and fatwas are issued against Nazia Hassan by the religious lobby even as a benignly paternalistic General Zia-ul-Haq, the military dictator who fueled religious intolerance, advises her to leave the country for her safety; Sufi music is valorised for its

spirituality but the syncretism of the Sufic ethos and its centrality to the making of Indo-Muslim culture is better ignored. If women singers' narratives border on melodrama, this surely is black comedy or gallows humour. The potential for divisiveness of a singular religion-based ideology; its openness to intolerance, bigotry and violence are exemplified by the 2009 brutal killing of the singer and dancer Shabana in Swat at the hands of the Taliban in the name of Islamic values. Written as history from below, the multiple voices of the text provide important insights on gender relations; on the ambivalence of desire and notions of the licit and illicit and the coercive power of social institutions and the state. In highlighting the strategic similarities between the self-censorship, evasions and silences employed by women singers and the censorship and re-writing of history impelled by the singular vision of the nation's cultural policy, the text raises questions on the uses of censorship, on authoritarian forms of ruling, on resistance and the right to dissent, on democracy, freedom of expression and civilisational growth, even as it does on the inherent dangers of singular visions and the violence and intolerance they breed. It is no accident that the book opens with the murder of a singer-dancer at what came to be called Khooni Chowk in Swat.

**Footnotes:**

- [1] Sigurdur Gylfi Magnusson, cited in Fawzia-Afzal Khan, *Siren Song*, Oxford University Press Pakistan, 2020. P 89  
[2] Ibid. Citing Homi Bhabha in *Location of Culture*.  
[3] Butler, Judith. 2009. Performativity, Precarity And Sexual Politics. *AIBR: Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*. 4(3)
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