

Book Review

Khoja-Moolji, Shenila. *Sovereign Attachments: Masculinity, Muslimness and Affective Politics in Pakistan*. 288pp. University of California Press 2021.

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Shenila Khoja-Moolji's book *Sovereign Attachments* weaves together an intricate and detailed narrative of "performative" masculinities in the Pakistani context where sovereignty is deemed "an ongoing and contingent project" that is "never fully accomplished" (p.195). These narratives are located within the wider context of the war on terror as it continues in Pakistan and through which the politicians, soldiers and militants become central to contestations of sovereignty. Masculinities are deeply tied to Islamic interpretations and expressions of Muslimness that inform what Khoja-Moolji calls "Islamomascularity". The workings of "Islamomascularity" is not only linked to how "masculinity" manifests in relation to "other" men, but it is also enacted through its feminine subjects as it draws in "affective publics" through feelings of kinship, memory and "affective atmospheres and pedagogies" (p.194).

Khoja-Moolji examines "cultural texts" of the military, the politician, and the militant to explore how Islamomascularity is defined. These texts include Inter Services Public Relations' (ISPR) publications and media productions (magazines, music videos, dramas, and short films, and ISPR's YouTube channel), autobiographies of politicians (Pervez Musharraf, Benazir Bhutto, and Imran Khan) and Taliban publications (magazines, speeches, autobiographies of leaders, pamphlets, and other documents). While acknowledging that the Taliban are just one amongst many "non-state" actors that challenge the state or military's legitimacy over an "Islamic Republic" of Pakistan, Khoja-Moolji illustrates how they construct a particular "Islamomascularity" narrative, at times in response to the military's cultural texts. She also examines three major Urdu and two major English newspapers, and the content of popular news channels. The analysis centres around prominent events that resulted in nation-wide debates on sovereignty, including the Army Public School (APS) attacks in 2014 (also the starting point of Khoja-Moolji's book), the arrest and later release of nineteen-year-old Naureen Laghari and the case of Aafia Siddiqui.

Part 1 of the book focuses on three main characters or "personifications of sovereign power": the head of the state, the soldier, and the *mujahid* (p. 24).

In the first chapter, Khoja-Moolji's choice of politicians provides an important point of comparison between the military man, Pervez Musharraf, and his self-portrayal as an "authentic" son of the "soil"; the female democrat Benazir Bhutto who employed masculinist tropes and "kinship metaphors" (p.45) for her "authentic" claim as a "harbinger of democracy and moderate Islam" (p.46), and the non-politician turned politician Imran Khan, who defines himself as the "outsider" and "redeemer," the "authentic" saviour of the nation. Islam is configured into these narratives in different ways that are intended to conform with democratic ideals, as each political player lays claim to "legitimate" power.

The second chapter shows how the military, in particular its media wing ISPR, create "affective economies of love for the *jawan*" (p.53) through particular narratives of heroism against the cowardice of the "*talib*." The *jawan* takes the form of the *ghazi* fighting for "Islam-Country", a saviour defending Islam against its misuse and abuse under the *talib*, and a martyr who is willing to sacrifice himself for his country and countrymen. Khoja-Moolji further touches upon the ethnic stereotyping of the Pashtun in relation to the Taliban, stereotypes that have travelled through the British colonial lens before being taken up in these cultural texts.

The third chapter moves on to the *talib*'s cultural texts, created at times in response to the narratives perpetuated by the military. Pakistan is presented as both a site of "betrayal" and "hope", betrayal in the state's failure to become an "Islamic Republic" and hope in its potential as a "key site for the institution of *khilafat*" (p.89). It is in search of the *khilafat* that "jihad" is presented as "legitimate violence" and the Taliban portrayed as a "mujahid". The figure of the "pious" and righteous warrior dominates portrayals of the Taliban in their

cultural text who is not afraid of death. The enemy is clearly defined as the “Pakistani and American soldier”, but the Pakistani *jawan* is nonetheless described as worthy of redemption, with narratives inviting the *jawan* to join the righteous path. The Taliban’s contestation of “state sovereignty” is realised through an invocation to “divine sovereignty” as they lay claim to the ideal of “the *khilafat*” advancing God’s cause, and thereby becoming what Khoja-Moolji calls “a counterpublic to the state” (p.119).

The book in Part 2 moves on to the female subjects and their role in how Islamo-masculinity is performed and “counter- and ambivalent publics are formed” (p.123).

The fourth chapter examines the role of the “militant and military women” in the cultural texts of the military and the Taliban. For the Taliban these women are portrayed as the “muhajira” and the “mujahida”, those who “migrate to the areas occupied by the Taliban” and those who believe “in the Taliban’s political stance” (p.123). It is through “willing subordination” that these women become “authentic” Muslims and support the Taliban by taking on “caregiving and reproductive labour” (p.128). The women operate within “the Taliban patriarchy” even in the rare instances when they are called to take up arms to support the Taliban. The military women in the ISPR cultural texts are also portrayed as nurturers, as well as soldiers supporting the fight for the nation. The portrayal of the “army wife” dominates most narratives as she carries the “emotional and reproductive labour” on behalf of her husband, but unlike the *mujahida* is independent, and supported by the institution of the army.

Khoja-Moolji then moves on to the next female subjects, the “*beti* (daughter) and *behan* (sister)”. The fifth chapter focuses on how “kinship feelings” are evoked to “create and expand the scope of sovereignty” through these figures that are prominent “proxies” of male honour, “providing the affective environment for the sovereign functions of violence, rescue, rebuke, and forgiveness” (p.142). For the military these figures range from Naureen Laghari, the daughter who is redeemed in the national imagination, to Mukhtaran Mai, “the unruly daughter” who is disciplined for critiquing the state. For the Taliban, on the one hand these include Aafia Siddiqui, the students of Jami’a Hafsa, and the victim of the “Mahmudiyah rape and killings” in Iraq who need to be avenged, and on the other the “wayward sisters” Malala Yousafzai and Ayesha Gulalai who have strayed from the Muslim path of righteousness and need to be disciplined. However, it is the figure of Aafia Siddiqui that draws on contested narratives as her case brings condemnation from both human rights activists and right wing political groups, demanding that the Pakistani state perform its “masculinist responsibilities” as a saviour by rescuing her. These invocations from the public also call into question the ability of the state to protect its citizens, especially its vulnerable women, thereby challenging its Islamo-masculinity.

This challenge is also found in the figure of the “melancholic mother”. The sixth chapter is the most striking in its analysis

of the different roles ascribed to the grieving mother, from “mourning” to “melancholic.” In this chapter, the reader witnesses Khoja-Moolji’s intellectual prowess as she moves from Freudian analysis to queer theory by employing melancholy as a form of resistance for the grieving mother. The state creates the image of the “mourning mother” who “performs multiple functions: she is didactic in that she teaches appropriate affect management to mothers whose children may have died on the battlefield or during terrorist attacks”; she “activates the protective impulses of the masculinist state” and invokes a sense of collective mourning that prepares the nation for revenge (p.171). However, resistance to the state narrative can be in the figure of the “melancholic” mother. When some mothers of the APS victims challenge the national narrative of martyrdom and demand accountability, they take on the role of what Khoja-Moolji calls “melancholic mothers” who rise “in anger to disarticulate” their sons’ “killing as a sacrifice for the nation” and rearticulate it “as a consequence of state negligence.” They go on to assert “sovereignty over the dead child’s body through the intimacy of” their “relationship with him” while rejecting “the conditions that mark his death as permissible” (p.190). As readers in Pakistan, we witness this every year on the anniversary of the APS tragedy, as the state’s narrative and façade of remembrance unravels with the continued demands of the mothers (and fathers) for justice and accountability. The “melancholic mother” in this way “illuminate the affective dimension of sovereignty” (p.193). Khoja-Moolji shows how for the Taliban, the mourning mother is a “minor character” often appearing in narratives where the *talib* is confronting his guilt over abandoning her for the “greater cause.” While there is less discussion of the role of the mother in the Taliban cultural texts, and therefore in Khoja-Moolji’s book, there would be room for greater engagement with this silence and guilt, especially in relation to the good/bad Muslim son who abandons the parents. The silence speaks volumes about how certain narratives are co-opted for Islamo-masculinist agendas, while others are muted. The “mourning mother” trope is only used in the narratives related to those who are victims of state violence, becoming “a battle cry for the *mujahidin*” (p.192).

These six main chapters present unique and convincing arguments for contested sovereignties through performances of Islamo-masculinities in relation to counter- and affective publics in the context of Pakistan. Khoja-Moolji makes an important contribution to a critical body of emerging scholarship on securitisation, gender and statehood in Pakistan drawing on affect as a theoretical device in the company of equally important interventions made by scholars such as Maria Rashid in *Dying to Serve: Militarism, Affect, and the Politics of Sacrifice in the Pakistan Army*, and Nosheen Ali in *Delusional States: Feeling Rule and Development in Pakistan’s Northern Frontier* among others. She also stands out in her extensive intellectual engagement with masculinities in relation to statehood and Islam. It is important to note that *Sovereign Attachments* is published at a time when Pakistan is witnessing a new wave of terrorist attacks with the resurgence of the Taliban and its various factions, where the

cultural artefacts that Khoja-Moolji has so meticulously examined continue to expand, and the need for further engagement with this existing archive is ever more pressing. In this book she has provided a methodology and analytical framework that will be instrumental in understanding competing narratives of masculinities and sovereignties, with tools to study different types of state and non-state actors in relation to *affective politics* within Pakistan and beyond.

References

Ali, Nosheen (2019) *Delusional States: Feeling Rule and Development in Pakistan's Northern Frontier*. Cambridge University Press.

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