

No Shame for the Sun: Lives of Professional Pakistani Women

Shahla Haeri

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Shahla Haeri's groundbreaking work could not have emerged at a more desperately needed time. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the war on Iraq, the western media have worked feverishly to bombard the West with images and messages about Muslim women and Islam. Whether it is the image of Afghanistan's burqa-clad women or Iraq's veiled women, the message has been the same: All Muslim women are speechless, powerless, and often invisible victims of an oppressive monolithic Islam.

In *No Shame for the Sun: Lives of Professional Pakistani Women*, Haeri presents the reader with an insightful and poignant look at the lives of six educated, middle-class and upper-middle class, professional Pakistani women. Situated against Pakistan's changing social, political, economic, cultural, and religious landscapes, their successes, costs, and struggles "challenge the notion of a 'hegemonic' and monolithic Islam that victimizes Muslim women" (p. xi).

The book's preface spells out its main purpose: to render visible the experiences of professional Pakistani women within the larger goal of disrupting the dominant western stereotypes and beliefs of Muslim women. In the introduction, Haeri situates herself by raising a series of questions emerging from her own experiences as an Iranian-born, middle-class, educated, professional Muslim woman living and working in the United States. Namely, she questions her own invisibility resulting from the persistence of western stereotypical images and beliefs of women in the Muslim world and then offers an overview of the theoretical and historical rationale for their persistence.

The rest of the book is organized into three main sections. In the first section, Haeri communicates her feminist theoretical underpinnings amidst a historical, political, social, and cultural overview of Pakistan, thereby elaborating on many of the aspects mentioned by the women in their narratives. This paves the way for a smooth transition into the narratives, which comprise the remaining two sections (the bulk) of the book. The short conclusion highlights these women's power and agency, drawing attention to their accomplishments without trivializing their struggles and obstacles. Haeri points out that they encounter many of the same tensions and conflicts faced by their counterparts in the West and elsewhere, including reconciling their careers with their culture's demands regarding their duties as wives and mothers (p. 407). She acknowledges, as the narratives themselves illustrate, that their oppression is not grounded in a "hegemonic" Islam that victimizes Muslim women, but rather in "Pakistan's nation-building objectives, a growing religious intolerance and influence, and the dominant code of honor characteristic of a feudal and tribal society" (p. 407).

The book's organization is one of its key strengths, lending itself well to illustrating the power and agency of these women. Haeri's presentation of each woman's narrative in its entirety (organized as separate chapters), rather than dissecting and organizing them along common themes for the purpose of analysis, allows the reader a more intimate engagement with each woman. Furthermore, she strategically centers their voices by removing her own voice from the main text of the narratives (including the questions she poses to the women). Instead, she consigns her presence to footnotes and the last few pages of each chapter, where she offers her analysis of each woman's story.

Her analyses are understandably brief, since the women themselves reflect and theorize upon their own experiences in complex ways, revealing their high degree of social consciousness. This book is a "shared ethnography" (p. xii) in the truest sense, for it allows each woman to "author" her life. However, the depth of Haeri's own knowledge and insight cannot be underestimated, as is evidenced from the elaborate footnotes containing detailed explanations and countless sources from varied disciplines that build and expand upon the women's knowledge and further inform the reader.

Despite the fact that each narrative is distinguished by an overarching theme reflective of each woman's individuality, it is also clear that Haeri seeks the opinions of all women pertaining to specific topics, namely,

veiling, religion, Islamic fundamentalism, Islamic law, education, women's activism, and the complexity of gender roles in Pakistan. As a result, this evoked common themes that resonate strongly throughout the book: the resilience of Pakistan's oppressive feudal system, the dominance and oppressive nature of Pakistan's male centered honor (*izzat*) system, the consequences and challenges women encounter when inhabiting public spaces, the urgency for education and the dilemmas surrounding literacy, Pakistan's powerful political ideologies and structures, the complexities of identity and of familial relationships (particularly marital and parental relations), and the fluidity between culture and religion in Pakistan.

The book has, however, three shortcomings. First, despite the fact that their struggles and successes emanate from within Pakistan, many of them had the privilege of traveling to the West in varying capacities (e.g., educated, lived, taught, and visited). Haeri fails to consider the impact of this experience and its larger relevance to the book's main purpose. Second, while she illustrates these women's diversity and complexity, she neglects to interrogate the tendency of many of them to reify and essentialize the subaltern (Pakistan's mass of poor landless people, subjected to lifelong servitude by feudal landowners) into a monolithic victimized group, thereby underplaying their individual and collective agency. Third, while the narratives examine gender and class privilege and its intersections to varying degrees, there is only a brief acknowledgement of the privilege afforded to these women by virtue of their coming from a Muslim background. Haeri's failure to probe this religious privilege and its intersections is a serious omission for a book that focuses on an artificially constructed postcolonial society that contains a number of minoritized religious groups.

Despite its shortcomings, *No Shame for the Sun: Lives of Professional Pakistani Women* is a valuable contribution to a wide range of disciplines, particularly anthropology, sociology, women's studies, cultural studies, Islamic studies, and South Asian studies. After reading this book, there can be no doubt in the reader's mind that this is not only an exemplary scholarly work, but also a labor of love for Haeri.

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