

Lahore with Love Today: An Interview with Fawzia Afzal-Khan

By Hillary Stringer

Fawzia Afzal-Khan is a University Distinguished Professor of English and the Director of Women and Gender Studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey. She has published poetry, plays, and books of literary and cultural criticism, including *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* (Penn State University Press, 1993) and *A Critical Stage: The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan* (Seagull Press, 2005). Additionally, she is the editor of *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim American Women Speak Out* (Interlink Books, 2005), and co-editor of *The PreOccupation of Postcolonial Studies* (Duke University Press, 2000). Her memoir, *Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani Style*, was originally published by Syracuse University Press in 2010, and received rave reviews from both magazines and notable individuals such as Nawal el Saadawi, Bapsi Sidhwa, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Mandy Van Deven. The book addresses Pakistan's political, cultural, and social transformations over the past fifty years through the lens of Fawzia's experiences, exploring the ways in which her life as an international literary figure and activist both parallels and diverges from the lives of her girlfriends who remained in Pakistan. Then, Syracuse University Press dropped the book after an inadmissible threat of lawsuit was issued by one of the "characters" in the memoir. Fawzia has spoken about the controversy, both in an appendix to the new edition, published by Insanity Ink Publications (self-publication), and on her website (<http://fawziaafzalkhan.webs.com>). In the following interview with University of North Texas PhD Candidate Hillary Stringer, Dr. Afzal-Khan addresses the issues and questions raised by a text that is both global and local, personal and political, and discusses the injustice inherent in the suppression of her memoir and the current reception of the book today.

HS: In several instances throughout *Lahore with Love*, you acknowledge your own "postcolonial" mindset as a girl encountering Western Literature, using these texts to both to explicate your experiences as you trace your youthful self making sense of the world and to provide instances where intertextuality colors your worldview itself. On page 50, for example, you compare Sufi to Gilbert Osmond in order to reveal how reading *Portrait of a Lady* enabled you to see Hajira's

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precarious situation for exactly what it was. At the same time, you bluntly point out the problematic nature of looking at literature from the perspective of the Lord Macaulay's of the world: isolation from your own "native" or local artistic creations, something that you comment on when you describe the activist playwrights in the final section. Do you think that there can be universal "types" or situations that can and do help individuals find meaning in their own particulars, or do you feel like you would have reached the same conclusions as a girl if, for example, you had only been exposed to Pakistani texts?

FAK: Hmm...interesting question. I think its difficult to imagine "what if" situations or a-historical ones...all I can say is that I am acutely aware of being a product of a particular sociocultural context of a specific time period, with influences of colonial vestiges coloring my worldview and sense of self. I am not comfortable with the notion of a-historical "universalism" in any guise, literary, philosophical etc. What I can say is that there are "constellations" (in the Benjaminian sense) of very different sets of events from different contexts which can nevertheless illuminate something useful about the human condition especially in moments of crisis.

HS: You have several female activists in this book—your own scholarship, Madina's plays, Madina's communist writer-mother from South Africa, and, briefly, Nawal El Saadawi—but you also discuss how Umm Hassan, in a way, seems not only the most driven but, chillingly, the most successfully "liberated" woman. Can the worldview that Umm Hassan espouses provide a type of independence for women? How is it possible that Umm Hassan is "allowed" more independence than other women in the book?

FAK: Yes, a troubling issue to think about. There may be something to the notion of "agency" afforded/enacted by women working within the cultures of orthodoxy and conservative Islamism in recent times within postcolonial Muslim societies—as suggested by theorists like Saba Mahmood in her now-famous if controversial book, *The Politics of Piety*. It is such a discourse of "piety" that women like Umm Hassan have usurped for themselves and which allows them a "liberation" or independence which is nonetheless, heavily circumscribed and overdetermined by religion. Still, I would argue that the character of Madina in the book—as well as her Marxist mother—are very strong examples of "liberated" women; Madina, of course, being as bullheaded in her secular feminism as Umm Hassan is in her Islamist one.

HS: You often use Lahore's hot climate as a stand-in for the way that geography and location function in your psyche. In an age of increasing digitalization, do you think that the focus on the concrete, physical space of one's homeland has changed in some way? For example, do children who grow up with computers

conceptualize place differently? Or does everyone have the same “Madeline” triggers regardless?

FAK: Sadly, children growing up today have fewer of those “Madeline” triggers because they spend less time paying attention to the physicality of their location than, I think we of a pre-digital era did. Though of course there are children who don’t have PCs or if they do, cannot access them all the time in certain spaces (like Pakistan) due to constant electricity failures/blackouts etc—which forces them to acknowledge the physical contours and realities of their “home” space in fairly visceral ways. So, I suppose it again boils down to where you live and what access you have to the digital realm. Overall though, youngsters the world over have a more connected, globalized sense of themselves vis a vis others in which the virtual spaces they inhabit sometimes appear more real, but less embodied, than the “actual” physical space and terrain they live in; I am thinking here also of the digital worlds of avatars, for example. This experience of disembodied geography and selfhood will surely alter the literary expression in years to come.

HS: If *Lahore with Love* was released now, in the aftermath of Osama Bin Laden’s death, do you think that it would have a different reception in America? In Pakistan?

FAK: I think the book continues to be relevant, perhaps even more so, in the aftermath of OBL’s death. It definitely is a book of the times, shedding important light (at least I like to think so) on a region of the world that has been at the center of our attention here in the US ever since 9/11 and continues to be so now. In Pakistan, I believe the reception was the same as it would be today—more focused on the “girlfriends” of the subtitle than on the light it sheds on a Pakistan that has vanished from sight. OBL’s death and its unfolding—along with Salmaan Taseer’s murder (he was the Governor of Punjab, the province I am from and of which Lahore is the capital city) and that of the sole Christian Minister of Minorities—underscore afresh the premise of nostalgia for that vanished secular past and promise of the Pakistan I am describing in my book.

HS: You open the introduction with a quote from Lauren Slater about the conditional nature of “truth”—or lack thereof—in memoir. Do you think that it is more important to try and convey “truth” when writing about unfamiliar people/places for a Western audience, or do you feel pressure to be a “representative” of Pakistani culture? It almost seems as if to do so can be seen as counterintuitive to the highly personalized and self-reflexive nature of memoir itself, since it is a genre that often focuses on personal experience.

FAK: I am a postmodernist when it comes to understanding “truth”—I believe its always about perception rather than a fixed absolute, and certainly memoir is kin to fiction in regards to the notion of truth, whether the truth presented is historical or personal. In fact, all we have in any kind of writing, however “objective” it may claim to be—are representations of truth-claims, highly mediated and never transparent. Thus, the notion that any one account or person can be “representative” of a complex agglomeration of people, of multilayered cultures, is nonsense.

HS: You mention that the United States contains many of its own repressive apparati despite its projected image as a land of free discourse. How do you think that the attempted censorship of your book (via the actions of Syracuse University Press) fits in with the complicated definition of “free speech” in America?

FAK: I’m glad you asked this question. My First Amendment rights as a US citizen were definitely not upheld by Syracuse University Press in the case of my memoir debacle. The Press caved at the merest hint of legal action—a threat that never materialized, a frivolous threat against which I had secured legal stay orders in Pakistan by employing my own counsel, thus freeing SUP to resume its publication of my book. It did not. I can only presume that academic presses like SUP pay lip service, nothing else, to the idea of free speech, and given the bad press Pakistan has been getting in the US regarding its status as a breeding ground of terrorists and extremists, the Editors at SUP perhaps felt frightened at the possibility that they might become victims of some sort of attack. Who knows. It was all very disappointing. As was the fact that the woman pushing to censor my book from Pakistan has spent her career defending Freedom of Speech there! The hypocrisy on both ends is mind-boggling.

HS: How is *Lahore with Love* doing as a self-published book, where is the book currently available for purchase, and what can we do to further support the distribution of your memoir?

FAK: *Lahore with Love* is doing quite well as a self-published book, and many faculty have begun teaching it which of course is the best way to keep the book alive and discussion-worthy. So, if faculty can be encouraged to put it on their syllabi for courses on Womens Studies, Postcolonial Literature, South Asian Literature etc., that would be super! Additionally, people can create a Facebook "I like this" mssg, encourage book groups they know to read and discuss it, and invite me to campuses and/or other venues to give readings. Also, reviews of the book would really help. This Special section that *Pakistaniaat* is doing about my book is great! More coverage like that in different journals would be wonderful.

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The book can be purchased directly on amazon.com :

<http://www.amazon.com/lahore-love-growing-girlfriends-pakistani-style/dp/1456462199>

Or by going to this website:

<https://www.createspace.com/3528735>