

## **Inevitable Multiplicity of Subject Positions in Fawzia Afzal Khan's *Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani-Style*\***

**By Nyla Ali Khan**

In a conversation that I had with Professor P. S. Chauhan via e-mail, he pointed out that in the recent surge in American autobiography the urge to assert and celebrate the self is an inevitable response to the gradual obliteration of the self by the flattening forces of contemporary culture of the megalopolis. In that surge, Fawzia Afzal-Khan's tightly-woven, well-crafted, poetically exuberant, intellectually incisive memoir, *Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani-Style*, is a delight to read. I particularly enjoyed reading Afzal-Khan's memoir because the narrator's location could have engendered the predicament of perceiving history and social and cultural praxes with an ahistorical cosmopolitanism, but the narrator steers clear of that danger by weaving the fragments of her memory to reconstruct history. In a narrative inflected by feminism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism, Fawzia Afzal Khan, in her memoir, is increasingly concerned with the ideology of narrative texts. By deploying poststructuralist methodology in her works, Afzal-Khan attempts to relate form or technique to issues of social, cultural, and political ideology.

*Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani Style* veers away from the formalism of narratology by serving certain interests and undermining others, expressing certain values and negating others, reconstructing certain power relations and challenging others. I borrow Susan Sniader Lancer's notion of both narrative structures and women's writing being constituted by the variables of race, gender, sexuality, education, marital status, social class, and nationality which generate complex conventions and relations of power ("Toward a Feminist Poetics of Narrative Voice." *Narrative/Theory*. By David H. Richter. New York: Longman Publishers, 1996:184).

This complexity of identities challenges stereotypes, alliances, and biases generated by hegemonic discourse. The narrative voice in Afzal-Khan's memoir engages questions of authority through employing the autodiegetic "I" to construct a credible voice and to mediate the voices of the other characters. This strategy enables the author to use narrative situations as textual mediums through which her own voice is channeled. Interestingly, Afzal-Khan combines the autodiegetic "I" with the authorial voice to transgress the conventional construction of the feminine. Within a narrative framework created by the interwovenness of postcolonialism and poststructuralism, the extension of

Afzal-Khan's fictional authority to nonfictional referents enables her to make fruitful incursions into a culture's political, social, literary, and intellectual paradigms. Afzal-Khan memoir sufficiently demonstrates that even the most general elements of narration are invested in a social and cultural ideology in which the narrating "I" is not separated from the female body, but, on the contrary, is gender specific.

For example, Afzal-Khan in her memoir, *Lahore with Love*, engages in more politically astute writing in order to underwrite the liaison of postcolonial and woman as the valorization of oppression, "elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for 'the good'" (Suleri, "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition." *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (1992): 759). Afzal-Khan clearly rejects the traditional categories of narrator and character, enunciating subject and a subject of the statement, the author and the protagonist. Afzal-Khan creates the inevitable multiplicity of subject-positions for the purpose of liberating herself from colonial and neo-colonial mediations of female identity, which threaten to manipulate her subjectivity by a complex of signs and practices. She delightfully shares with the reader that, "My place is now also a place where I manipulate my Muslim womanhood to make my way up the U.S. academic ladder, reporting to increased acclaim the dire situation of Muslim women of Pakistan. My place is now a paradox of no-place, my home is now abroad, I have become exotic to myself, a stranger to my own (s)kin" (10).

In her work, Afzal-Khan endeavors to reinterpret the repressive frameworks that essentialize the identities of former colonial female subjects by negotiating the dominant discourse from within in order to construct their subjectivity. She engages in reflective action to examine her own locations of privilege. Afzal-Khan tries to self-actualize and intervene in patriarchal national history by seeking in the interaction of modernity and communal memory not a vertical relationship producing totalized notions of nation, gender, class, race, ethnicity but intersectionalities between different cultural times, spaces, and ways of knowing the self in relation to the family, society, and the cosmos. She speaks from her location about the political realities that have woven the web of social relations she inhabits or has inhabited. Afzal-Khan writes, "I have traveled to seek the 'different,' 'the exotic,' that always elusive space of greatness, of liberation, which is also the space of untruth, of deception. I have traveled far and wide, so wide as to put millions of miles and several continents between my mother country and myself. What has sustained me, kept me grounded through all the flying about I've done in the past three decades, has been the memories" (8).

Like feminist scholars Hazel Carby, Valeri Smith, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Barbara Smith, Afzal-Khan considers how race, nationality, class, religion, and gender intersect in the social construction of subjectivity. Fawzia Afzal-Khan's work gives the clarion call for an increasingly materially grounded, historically aware, and yet also theoretically sophisticated feminism. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out, Western feminists portray themselves as "educated, modern, as having control over their own

bodies and 'sexualities,' and the freedom to make their own decisions" ("Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes\ Torres. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991: 200). Post-independence subcontinental literature seems to ignore the "epistemic violence" involved in forging the postcolonial subject, in particular the female postcolonial subject (Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. London: Routledge, 1993: 234). The vision circulated by this literature creates the perception of an "authentic" consciousness. The narrator of *Lahore With Love*, who is well-educated, articulate, intellectually perceptive, upwardly mobile, disrupts this essentializing monolithic discourse. Her position makes the boundaries of cultural identity and linguistic identity permeable, engendering the creation of a counter-culture that is not always explicable in terms of an allegory of otherness (Suleri Goodyear, *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992: 4). This effect is achieved by the perception of the narrative as a site where multiple discourses intersperse with one another to create a polyvalent space. It is in this space that the material history of subject-constitution can be read via and in opposition to hegemonic structures.

The women who play significant roles in Afzal-Khan's narrative – Sam, Haji aka Shelley, Amena aka Hayley, Saira, Honey, Madina - have material existences. These women are portrayed as intelligent and articulate persons whose subjectivity cannot be split into simplistic binaries: literate-illiterate, urban-rural, affluent-impooverished, repressed-emancipated, domestic-professional. Afzal-Khan's women characters do not fit the mold of the gendered subaltern in the "third-world." Generic constructions of the "third-world woman" create an essentialist entity, whose unprivileged position of playing second fiddle to men in all situations imposes restrictions on her social, political, cultural, and intellectual mobility. The rabidity of this discourse further distorts political and social systems by minimizing the threat of cultural difference posed to the normative center. Such a discourse constructs paradigms that allow the compartmentalization of the "third-world." The narrator's recounting of political and social events establishes this discourse and the subjectivities it shapes as slippery and liable to change as the frameworks of their possibility also change. Afzal-Khan foregrounds the subject constitution of the women in her narrative as "distinct actualities" that avert the debilitating generic construction of "third-world" women. This female subject is not a monolithic "Other," but a heterogeneous figure whose richness and complexity cannot be compressed into pigeon-holes that are created either by pre-colonial indigenous discourse or neo-orientalist strategies.

The narrator's *sahelis* are vivacious, exuberant, sensual, remarkable young women eager to plunge into life. Unwittingly, their curiosity, infatuation with the grandiosity and loftiness of theatre and literature, their unsure and tentative baby steps into the mysterious realm of sexual intimacy, their implicit and explicit advocacy of a

space in which women could pave their own paths makes them anathema to the rigidly patriarchal, brutally masculine and militaristic culture of Pakistan. Afzal-Khan's *sahelis* are blossoming young women who have the chutzpah to make strategic life choices regarding education, livelihood, marriage, childbirth, sexuality, etc., which are critical for people to lead the sort of lives they want to lead and constitute life's defining parameters. But to their chagrin they find themselves constrained by the normative structures through which Pakistani society creates gender roles. Afzal-Khan mourns the erasure of selfhood that some of her friends experienced: "Sometimes I wonder who it is of us all who succumbed to the dizzying pull of that spiral into the abyss of a self that is permanently dis-eases in the otherness of outsiderdom" (144).

The increasing gender violence in Pakistan is replete with instances of daughters being iconicized as repositories of familial honor making it obligatory for the patriarch of the household to prevent that honor from being besmirched, even if that means ruthlessly murdering the daughter who has the "audacity" to choose her own partner; there are instances of politically empowered women being culturally disempowered and made to faithfully play the compliant wife who uncomplainingly bears the pain of her husband's many infidelities; there are other instances of ambitious and motivated young women who are reduced to intellectual penury by being made to take the back seat in deference to their husband's managerial decisions; the reduction of the victim of rape to a wily seductress by Zia's infamous Hudood Ordinance of 1979; the culpable objectification of women and the erosion of their selfhood legitimized by the Hudood Ordinance; the negation of a woman's powers of reason and intellect by the discrediting of her testimony in a court of law; there is an instance of a female vigilante group in Pakistan that makes a facile attempt to reconstruct historical and cultural discourses in order to inspire the kind of cultural nationalism that fundamentalist politics requires. This organization advocates the creation of a homogeneous culture devoid of the freedoms that the women of the subcontinent have traditionally enjoyed. Their draconian methods to enforce purdah, reinforce a patriarchal structure in which an unaccompanied woman is rendered vulnerable, and curtail the mobility of the technology savvy youth end up reinforcing the already well-entrenched hierarchy. To her credit, Afzal-Khan does not conflate Islamic epistemology with cultural praxes in Pakistan.

The narrator's politically and culturally constructed representation of her existence is manifested in her rendition of the coming of age of Pakistan. The indigenous elite of the Indian subcontinent engendered a nationalistic discourse which repositioned the postcolonial subject so that nation and nationalism became key concepts. The civil war in 1971 saw a further division of Pakistan and the creation of another geographical space: Bangladesh. Afzal-Khan mourns the terror spawned by that war in which rape was a weapon deployed to humiliate and degrade the "insurgent" Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan by the swashbuckling military of West Pakistan. After the gruesome partition of India in 1947, the establishment of Bangladesh as a nation-state caused another

indeterminacy in the determinant concept of “nation.” The aftermath of 1971 was a period of political instability in Pakistan. The country witnessed a series of coup d’états, which were orchestrated by the army in order to install military dictatorships. The ardent nationalism of that era elicited the cohesive structure of an entrenched and centralized nation-state. Afzal-Khan is aware that the rhetoric of nationalism deployed to create a neat homogeneity can engender the politicization of identity in the form of fundamentalism, xenophobia, and a fanatical espousal of tradition. She observes that Pakistan is a paradox: “A place where the spaces I know most intimately are more secular than their counterparts in that paean to secularism, the US of A. And yet, a place where fanatical extremism, intolerance, and xenophobia have deep roots, sometimes pushing their way aboveground in the least expected of spaces” (8). Afzal-Khan seems to resolve the ambivalence created by this political kaleidoscope, a space that slides geographically, linguistically, and ideologically by characterizing the sovereign subject as decentered. Afzal-Khan concludes that unlike her, her *sahelis*, “never had to contend with the ever-multiplying fissures of a selfhood fractured into so many roles, performances of identity I am doomed to rehearse and repeat ad nauseum as I shuttle back and forth, back and forth between here and there, America and Pakistan, my life as an academic, a scholar, a part girl, a mother, a daughter, a wife, a friend, a lover, an actorsingerpoetactivistmemoirist” (144-45).

I was raised in a secular Muslim home in we were encouraged to speak of the “liberation of women” and of a culturally syncretic society. I was taught that Islam provided women with social, political, and economic rights, however invisible those rights were in our society. It was instilled in me that Islam gave women property rights, the right to interrogate totalizing social and cultural institutions, the right to hold political office, the right to assert their agency in matters of social and political import, and the right to lead a dignified existence in which they could voice their opinions and desires. I was also educated in a Catholic school run by Irish missionaries, where my *sahelis* and I took especial delight in the innocuous trespasses of well-bred Convent girls. Forbidden fruit is especially delectable in a convent setting! I remember being blissfully unaware of the social injustices, political disenfranchisement, and economic inequities, and like Afzal-Khan and her *sahelis*, “. . . waiting for the bogeyman of nightmares, to snatch us and throw us into the vortex of life’s complexities” (144). But I have learned that a lot of the time cultural praxes exist independently of religious epistemologies; I have witnessed the militarization of the sociocultural fabric of Kashmir; I watch with remorse the clamping down of intellectual freedoms in Kashmir and the growing influence of fanatical elements in that polity; I am saddened by the shutting down of dissenting voices; I mourn the erosion of women’s activism in Kashmir by the reduction of their identities to grieving mother, martyr’s mother, or rape victim; I grieve the relegation of sane voices in civil society to the background; I am pained by the scathed psyches of women suffering psychosomatic illness in conflict zones. I, too, shuttle back and forth

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between America and Kashmir, my life as an academic, a scholar, a mother, a daughter, a wife, a friend, a writer-activist-public speaker. Like Afzal-Khan, I ask myself, “Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?” (145).

\* A version of this review article appeared in the *South Asian Review* 30.2 (2010). Reproduced with kind permission of Professor Kamal Verma, Editor of *South Asian Review*.