

Book Reviews and Related Matters

The Feminism that Failed Itself

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Rafia Zakaria, *Against White-Feminism: Notes on Disruption*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2021, HB, 25644 p., ISBN-13: 978-1324006619

Rafia Zakaria is a distinguished author, feminist, civil rights activist, and, above all, a sharp and sensitive Muslim woman born, raised, married, and divorced in Pakistan. Her uncanny take on non-White “otherness” is unmatched in the women’s studies. Inspired by Simon de Buovior’s classic *The Other Sex*, Zakaria situates the “intersectionality” of a White feminist who “fails to cede space to the feminists of color who have been ignored, erased, or excluded from the feminist movement” (p. ix).

Intimacy—a recent Netflix flick—is instructive with a didactic message. Victims of harassment should never be forgotten. It’s, however, unthinkable on the other side of spectrum. Marginalized people, despite their diverse demographics, have one thing in common, which must be accepted universally. As I work on this review, two horrible mass killings atop news headlines in the United States: mayhem in Buffalo, NY, and mass-murder of 19 school children and their teachers in Uvalde, TX followed by carnage and mayhem in seven more cities. There is a horrid equivalency between street mayhem and the racist campus violence in America. Understandably—thanks to social media—the entire world knows instantly about the mass killing in a school or a grocery store that does not spare even school children, health care workers, teachers, judges, and the Asians and Black people. The hidden violence perpetrated against the “marginals” in academia is seldom reported anywhere. A White-racist-feminist (or supremacist)—may quietly rein a whole campus without a single eyebrow ever raised. The paradox of this dualist-supremacist terror is known to those “marginals” who have silently endured and survived these racist indignities.

If read carefully, Zakaria captures the essence of “otherness,” closely similar to my experiences, without mincing a word. *Against White Feminism*, thematically, records *Notes on Disruption*. What does it disrupt? Why? The

author's narratives—critiques, musings, emotions—signify the impact of silent micro-assaults that dehumanize the people of color in an otherwise advanced society. In eight well-organized chapters, the sensitive author courageously illuminates instances and encounters, punctuated anecdotally, with the structure of White supremacy, which has been threatened by the power of patience, protest, and disruption. The main body of this thoughtful, provocative, and radical monograph may well be grasped by a review of the following textual anatomy. Evidently as shown below, from Introduction to Conclusion, the narratives are brutally honest and critical.

Introduction: *At a wine bar, group of feminists*

One: *In the Beginning, there were white women*

Two: *Is solidarity a lie?*

Three: *The white savior industrial complex and the ungrateful brown feminist*

Four: *White feminists and feminist wars*

Five: *Sexual liberation is women's empowerment*

Six: *Honor killings, FGC, and white feminist supremacy*

Seven: *"I built a white feminist temple"*

Eight: *From deconstruction to reconstruction*

Conclusion: *On fear and future*

In the wake of Enlightenment, philosophers and scientists expended the horizons of knowledge which enhanced human consciousness. Reason, cause-and-effect relationship, and search for freedom became the world's crucible. The outcome was a search for human liberation at the expense of age-old superstitions and dogmas that enslaved humanity in different guises. Unification of knowledge led to the discovery of "truth" based on empirical findings that triggered a worldwide empowerment of the oppressed ones. This achievement was considered a gift of the Western discoveries, inventions, and movements that liberated humanity from the darkness of the past. This radicalized thinking and practice of "scientific" perspective revolutionized archaic institutions and structures. The seeds of democracy and socialism sprouted, giving birth to feminism premised on equality and justice. Sexual liberation came to embody the "sum total of empowerment." Zakaria, following the "tradition of intersectional feminist forbearers Kimberlé Crenshaw, Adrienne Rich, and Audri Lorde...[sic], refutes and reimagines the apolitical aspirations of white feminist empowerment in this radical critique, with Black and Brown feminist thought at the forefront."

A group of feminists at a Manhattan wine bar explode the basic myth of a solid movement. The perpetual problem with non-White "others" is their "relatability." We can relate to others; but they can't relate to us. A color-blind, gender-centric White feminism is a pervasive reality to define the "others." They have the power to legitimize our non-White "relatability." The hegemonic structure thus

comprises inclusions and exclusions with inbuilt inequality sustaining the cult of “white supremacy.” Zakaria’s depiction of this “racialized calculus” is clear:

This is the way that hegemony protects itself: silencing and punishing difference by stripping away its legitimacy. These kinds of motivated value judgments are at the heart of white supremacy. And this is how white supremacy operates within feminism, with upper-middle-class white women at the top ensuring that the credentials that upper-middle-class white women have remain the most valued criteria within feminism itself. (p. 9)

Zakaria’s take on Western feminists is worth a thoughtful consideration in the wake of many “fuzzy” and “wooly” constructs that dominate academic discourses. *Empowerment*, *security*, *opportunity*, and if I may add, *diversity*, have been used to enhance women’s “economic” rather than “political” strengths. Quoting Srilatha Baltiwala, the author argues that “empowerment is now conceptualized to subvert the politics that the concept was meant to symbolize” (p. 65). As such, globally, “political resistance, in Columbia or elsewhere, is NGO-ized” (p. 62). Much of social development in the “trickle-down feminism” has been tailored as to suit the needs of “white donors” at the expense of the “poor Brown woman” (p. 67). The implication of this aphorism colors the theory and practice of social work as it is offered in non-Western countries. Many social work organizations, networks, leaders, and institutions in India, for example, tend to *Hinduize* an otherwise secular profession in the name of decolonization and Indianization.

A labyrinthine of fissures that confound feminism unravel “white feminist supremacy” and “the ungratefulness of the Brown feminists.” Many aspects of feminism—“seuro-feminism” (p. 87), “Anglobalization” (p. 87), and “sex-positive feminism” (p. 104) permeate the language of feminism co-opted by nation-states, CIA, journalism, books, and films. “Ultimately...[sic] it is the feminism of a ruthless individualism that motivates the behavior of too many white women journalists” (p. 103). Racism thrives in the National Organization of Women (NOW). Only recently, its leadership included some non-White feminists but it wasn’t without White resentment. White feminist temples and their reconstruction are fraught with conflicts that amount to counter-deconstruction. The author’s fears simmer under the roof of the wished-for future. Some of her concluding observations do not bode well for a universal ideology of liberatory praxis that negates whiteness, which “emerged from the bedrock of white supremacy, itself the legacy of empire and slavery” (pp. 208–209).