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Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/8050
ISSN: 1960-6060

Publisher
Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 20 July 2022.

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As a student of ethnomusicology trained, too, in Hindustani classical music, I was intrigued by Fawzia Afzal-Khan’s latest book *Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan Through Its Women Singers*. Afzal-Khan—a professor of English and Gender Studies in the United States as well as a vocalist trained in the Hindustani tradition—uses case studies of selected female singers to explore some of the contradictions of Pakistani society. On the one hand, Pakistan is a conservative Muslim-majority state where many people believe that the performing arts in general are contrary to religious injunctions and that women singers specifically are not “respectable” women. Yet, divas such as “Madam” Noor Jehan (1926–2000) are widely celebrated and have legions of fans. Afzal-Khan thus wanted to provide a more nuanced depiction of Pakistani society at a time when many people in the West have a very stereotypical image of Muslims and particularly of Muslim women, whom they believe lack all personal agency and are completely covered by the burqa. Clearly, the truth is not that simple. In this book, Afzal-Khan explores the ways in which great singers like Malka Pukhraj (1912–2004), Roshan Ara Begum (1917–1982), and Noor Jehan employed their personal agency within the constraints of a conservative Islamic society to fulfil their ambitions to become performing artists.

Afzal-Khan utilizes a framework resting on feminist and performance theory. In the Introduction, she defines the book’s objective: “my aim is to provide interested readers with a sense of Pakistan’s cultural history from a different perspective than that extolled by official state narratives, as well as from orientalist accounts of ‘oppressed Muslim womanhood’ that circulate ad nauseam in Western media; in other words, a ‘herstorical account from below,’ utilizing women singers as the key heuristic site from whence to develop this alternative reading ...” (xviii). She elaborates on this objective as follows: “I am interested less in the sociology of women singers’ lives, than in tracing the ways in which these singers’ performances ‘create cultural representations of gender identities’; representations that issue challenges to embedded cultural gender norms of Pakistan” (xviii).

Afzal-Khan situates her methodology within the discipline of cultural studies and describes her theoretical orientation as a “postcolonial feminist cultural studies approach” (xix). She uses this approach in order to “understand the imbrication of issues of gender, class, religion, and postcolonial state history as they have impacted the lives and work, not only of the women singers of Pakistan but also of their audiences, in a constantly evolving exchange that reflects or is shaped by shifting societal pressures and values; and, in turn, shapes and alters these same values and attitudes” (xx).
Afzal-Khan’s book is wide-ranging and covers a wide time period, from the years preceding Pakistan’s creation in 1947 to the present. It includes many genres, from \textit{khayal} to Sufi-Pop. The central theme of the book is articulated in the first two chapters entitled “The Respectable Courtesan” (focusing on Malka Pukhraj) and “Roshan Ara Begum: Performing Classical Music, Gender, and Muslim Nationalism in Pakistan.” In these initial chapters, Afzal-Khan develops her notion of “respectability politics.” This refers to the ways in which these artists had to negotiate their public image in order to align themselves with the norms of \textit{ashraf} Muslim families, which hold that a woman’s primary place is in the home. Though they were both great artists, Malka Pukhraj and Roshan Ara Begum identified themselves primarily as “good” wives and (in Pukhraj’s case) mothers. This allowed them to distance themselves from their alleged “courtesan” backgrounds, considered dubious by mainstream society. In Pukhraj’s case, she was a court singer in the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, ruled at the time by Maharaja Hari Singh. It is telling that, according to her daughter Tahira Syed (1958)—herself an accomplished singer, Pukhraj’s children didn’t learn about this aspect of their mother’s background until she wrote her autobiography in her eighties (Afzal-Khan 2020:5). It is also important to note that Pukhraj dedicated her memoirs to two men: first her husband and then her patron (Maharaja Hari Singh). Afzal-Khan deems this another “normative gesture of respectability” (p. 3).

Roshan Ara Begum’s story is very similar to Malka Pukhraj’s. A well-known \textit{khayal} singer in pre-Partition India (where she was known as Bombaywali Roshan Ara Begum), she married a Muslim police officer (who was stationed in Bombay at the time). After the creation of Pakistan, Roshan Ara accompanied her husband to Lalamusa, a small town in Pakistani Punjab—much against the wishes of her ardent fans who begged her to stay in Bombay. However, she had no choice but to accompany her husband wherever he was going. The religious contrast can be sharpened by adding something that is not mentioned in Afzal-Khan’s book: the husband of Siddeshwari Devi (1908–1977)—a Hindu and another prominent \textit{thumri} singer of the era—who was from Gujranwala, moved to Benaras, where she performed, to be with her (Devi and Chauhan 2000:79).

Once in Pakistan, Roshan Ara’s husband forbade her to perform—mostly due to opposition from his own conservative family members. Because she was living in such a small town, she could not even find musicians to accompany her practice. Afzal-Khan writes: “[Roshan Ara’s] freedom/agency is contingent upon the demands and values of others whose ideology is rooted in a particular understanding of Islam as antithetical to music” (p. 32). Even when she resumed performing, Roshan Ara’s career was controlled by her husband, who made sure that her performances did not violate the norms of respectability. His emphasis on respectability is underscored by his endorsement of her biography (Naheed 1995) which can be translated as “I dedicate this book to my pious, great and faithful wife.” For someone who was an extraordinary musician to be defined primarily as a “faithful wife” is deeply revealing.

Afzal-Khan contrasts the careers of Roshan Ara Begum and Hirabai Barodekar (1905–1989), both students of the famous Ustad Abdul Karim Khan. Hirabai—born Champakali Khan—was also his daughter but was raised as a Hindu after the separation of her parents. Afzal-Khan argues that Roshan Ara Begum had to sacrifice her career to the Muslim \textit{ashraf} norms of respectability while Hirabai, on the other hand, became a “respectable Hindu middle-class singer-performer in a variety of music genres” (p. 39).
Afzal-Khan writes: “The differing fates of these two women singers can be directly linked to the imbricated discourses of gender, nation, religion, and music that emerged in the late nineteenth century and shaped the public sphere along communal ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ lines” (p. 39).

Afzal-Khan’s argument links “respectability politics” to Islam. This is understandable since she is writing about post-1947 Pakistan, a country in which 97 percent of the population professes the Islamic faith. However, it is important to keep in mind that “respectability politics,” particularly when it came to female singers, had been engaged in all over the subcontinent since the nineteenth century, with the beginnings of the “Anti-Nautch Movement.” This was an attempt by Indian nationalists during the colonial period to sanitize certain cultural practices that they believed were “decadent.” In particular, there was an attempt to ban “nautch (dancing) girls.” In her article “Gender and the Politics of Voice: Colonial Modernity and Classical Music in South India,” Amanda Weidman discusses the emergence of upper-caste women on the concert stage in early twentieth century South India. Just as North Indian music had to be rescued from the courtesans, South Indian music had to be reclaimed from devadasis, hereditary temple performers from a variety of non-Brahmin castes. The sign of successful classicization “as the transformation of music and dance into “arts” fit for upper-caste middle-class “family women” (Weidman 2003:194).

Thumri as a genre was particularly associated with courtesans. In order to make it acceptable for middle-class women to perform, it had to be de-eroticized and reinterpreted in a devotional manner. Lalita du Perron (2002) notes that thumri performers stopped accompanying their singing with dance gestures. Lyrics were also sanitized. Thus, “respectability politics” has nothing inherently to do with Islam and long predates the creation of Pakistan. However, there is no doubt that Muslim women singers face greater challenges than their Hindu counterparts, since music itself is contested in Islam while it is given an honored place in Hinduism.

It is also important to note the contrast between a performer like “Madam” Noor Jehan and those discussed above. Afzal-Khan notes that “Madam” refused to indulge in any type of respectability politics. She was open about her scandalous marriages and divorces. Ironically, this only made her Pakistani fans love her more. One can speculate that this different treatment was due to her background as a successful film actress, cinema being an industry that is often held to different standards of expected and accepted behavior.

The book’s audience in Pakistan, which is primarily composed of music lovers and not academics, may not necessarily be interested in or able to follow much of Afzal-Khan’s theoretical framework—which often becomes too abstruse for non-specialists. It is to Afzal-Khan’s credit that, despite writing as an academic in the West for an academic readership, she has been able to sustain the interest of an entirely different set of readers and also managed to convey the essence of her theoretical framework.

Afzal-Khan herself notes that she has not adequately discussed many other female singers because the book is focused primarily on theory. Chief among these omissions are the outstanding ghazal performers Iqbal Bano (1935–2009) and Farida Khanum (1929-) who adapted to the same social constraints by innovating musically and finding a new place for themselves. They manifested their agency by rising to prominence and forcing acceptability, in a manner different from that of “Madam” Noor Jahan. However, Afzal-Khan notes that her book is meant to serve as a beginning and hopes

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that other scholars of Pakistani music will build on it. It is certainly an important theoretical intervention and one to be recommended highly to ethnomusicologists and those interested in Pakistani society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. However Malka Pukhraj notes in her memoir that, as late as the 1940s in Lahore, she would accompany her thumris with dance gestures and charge double for dancing as well as singing (Pukhraj 2003:223).

2. For more details on the links between thumri and gender politics, see Malini Nair (2022).

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