Maria Rashid. *Dying to Serve: Militarism, Affect, and the Politics of Sacrifice in the Pakistan Army*

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Pakistan is the world’s fifth most populous country and maintains the fifth largest army to be sitting on a considerable nuclear arsenal. Historically the Pakistan Army is a successor to the British Indian Army and governed Pakistan directly for a period of thirty years (Akhtar 2018; Zaidi 2014). It benefited from the emergence of a security centric political economy, which helped it to become the fulcrum of the Pakistani polity and “guardian” of its political system (Jalal 1990; Saif 2010).

The causes and consequences of the army’s domination have remained a prominent theme of scholarly discussion on Pakistan. Literature on the subject has striven to understand the cause-and-effect relation of this domination, using multiple theoretical and disciplinary lenses. The centrality of the perception of threat from India and the necessity of building a strong defense led to the emergence of a mindset enabling martial rule (Jalal 1990; Siddiqa 2017). Ahmad (2013) saw this domination as a direct result of British rule in the Punjab province and the way the latter was divided between India and Pakistan in 1947. Saif (2010) highlighted another factor causing the rise of a pretorian state in Pakistan, namely the imperialist interests of the United States in the region. Most scholars have lamented this domination and the role it has played in thwarting the process of democratization and economic development (Khan, Akhtar, and Bodla 2014; Rizvi 2000; Shah 2014), destabilizing regional peace (Paul 2014), and creating precarious domestic politics, completely dependent upon the whims and winks of generals, referred to as establishmentarian democracy (Waseem 2022), as well as a public institution that behaves like a corporation to secure its economic interests (Siddiqa 2017). Notwithstanding the richness of these explanations, hardly any attention had up till now been paid to the social and political mechanisms legitimizing this domination at the societal level. The nature, construction and working of the mechanism of domination and patronage are the focus of this new book by Maria Rashid.

A psychologist by training, Rashid mobilized her experience as both practitioner and activist supporting causes such the defense of the rights of women and children against all kinds of violence. Her first book, Dying to serve, addresses the issue of the institutionalization of violence at multiple scales in Pakistan. Based on her training in psychology, she furnishes a well-rounded narrative pinpointing the mediating role that affects play in building and sustaining an exclusionary and violent socio-political order in Pakistan. The ideology of militarism and centrality of military to this order are the core theme of the book.

She crafts an interdisciplinary conceptual approach, combining institutional and socio-cultural methods of observation to unveil the mechanisms of the military’s domination over state and society. The missing link for her, to which little attention has been paid in
the past, is the presence of a symbiotic relationship among soldiers, their families, and the army, sustained by a subtle management of affects. Affects are “embodied, unformed and less conscious dimension of human feelings” such as anxiety, paranoia, rage and guilt (Hoggett and Thompson 2012). By meticulously collecting testimonies of soldiers and their families while sifting through the military’s operational policy archives on the compensation packages for families of deceased soldiers, the author throws light on the ways guilt and anxiety promote feelings of loyalty and respect in the hearts of soldiers and their families.

Building on and going beyond previous scholarship on the topic, the book ventures into the historical sociology of the Pakistani state to show the centrality of military and militarism to the Pakistani project of state and nation building. Rashid highlights the need to shift our focus towards the “production of the instruments and subjects of violence: military soldiers and their families” to understand the functionality of military power (p. 5). The book’s protagonists are not high-ranking officers, serving or retired, but ordinary soldiers and their families. This is the first time Pakistani soldiers have been the center of scholarly discussion on war, military, and militarism.

The book consists of nine chapters bringing together expansive themes of loss, grief, and sacrifice to highlight the religious-nationalist project of militarism that drives the official narrative of Pakistani nationhood. The principal source of evidence is an ethnography of families and soldiers residing in the martial district of Chakwal. The ethnographic engagement encompassed five villages, but overwhelmingly it took place in the village of Pallwal. The ethnographic and observational information is supported by more than 100 interviews with soldiers, administrators, and officers, spread across the cities of Chakwal, Rawalpindi, and Abbottabad. A chronological-cum-thematic review of each chapter is provided below.

The first chapter introduces the subject of inquiry and starts with theoretical insights into the significance of affective relations in understanding the construction and functioning of militarism in Pakistan as elsewhere. It tries to show how selected affects are created, manipulated and instrumentalized to “produce politics” (p. 7) in Pakistan without the use of coercion. The gendered display of stylized soldierly bodies, militaristic scripts and symbols in textbooks, model rockets and guns in the chowks of cities and towns as well as spectacular performances of annual military parades and the erecting of Martyr Memorials are examples of technologies of rule that rely heavily on evoking sentiments to conquer the hearts of the citizenry (p. 15). The state/army rather than “become[ing] averse to sentiments … actively” cultivates them, invests in them and manipulates them to develop a specific type of governmentality mediated by affects (p. 15).

The next chapter offers a reflexive view on the ways affects are deployed (by event organizers) and displayed by participants in the annual event of Youm-e-Shuhada (Martyrs’ Memorial). This annual event is organized by the Pakistan army at GHQ (General Headquarters) located in the garrison town of Rawalpindi. This event, as Rashid points out, has become an important public relation exercise for the army since Pakistan’s active engagement in the War on Terror (WoT) started to counter a homegrown Islamist insurgency in the northern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). This war, as Rashid repeatedly remarks throughout the book, was conceived and publicly promoted in a manner very different from past wars. The enemy this time was not “Hindu India” but devious Muslims (bad Taliban), who share religious, linguistic, and
cultural similarities with army soldiers. The ideological tensions pushed the army to re-craft not only its war strategy but also its ideological underpinnings. For instance, it made stringent efforts to keep the repertoire of Shahadat (martyrdom) reserved for itself by financing songs, films and dramas, and staging events such as YeS (Youm-e-Shuhada).

The official script of the YeS ceremony, telecast live via digital media platforms, contained repeated references to religious metaphors and symbols, elaborating a narrative conflating martyrdom with sacrificing one’s life for the homeland; a homeland created in the name of religion. The script of these rehearsed performances combined religious imagery with a repertoire of kinship solidarity to develop a gendered grammar of nationhood represented by moving images of slain soldiers (p. 25). The grief of fathers, mothers and widows was put on display to cement bonds of allegiance between families of soldiers and the army, besides making wars more legitimate to the public.

The third chapter takes a step back and delves into the history of the relationship between the army and the “Land of Valiant”; the Chakwal district. This district, at least since the beginning of the 20th century, has provided the largest number of soldiers from Punjab. Initially, to legitimize this kind of selective recruitment, the British “invented” the theory of martial tribes (Yong 2005). Later in the postcolonial period, the notion of dying for one’s nation and religion displaced the British invention of martial groups. On the other hand, for residents of Chakwal, military service is largely a way of ending ghurbat (poverty) through pakki naukary (stable employment) (p. 55). Given the Barani rain-fed nature of agriculture and scant means of earning a livelihood, military service has for a very long time been the dominant source of income and employment. This has made the army a unique institutional patron, providing safety and security to its member clients.

This clientelist relationship is sustained by a comprehensive and unique system of soldier welfare that the army maintains for its troops. This system enables the army to act like a traditional patron taking care of clients (soldiers and their families) to receive in return their unwavering attention and support. In addition to post-retirement jobs, the institutional welfare system, comprising generous pensions, subsidized housing, education and health facilities, make the clients stick with the institution. These mechanisms influence in large part the conduct of potential recruits, serving soldiers and their families. It has been argued that the Pakistani state lacks the will to use disciplinarian modes of power and banks mostly on traditional sovereign modes of governance (Daechsel 2011). However, the army’s welfare system, attached to an extensive recruitment infrastructure in Chakwal (p. 62), could be taken as a non-typical (in the case of Pakistan) illustration of governmentality: an art of government that uses welfare to influence the conduct of citizens-subjects (Foucault 2007). Therefore, this chapter counterbalances previous theorizations of the Pakistani state and develops a theoretical space that connects patronage theory with governmentality studies to show the complexity of state-society relations in Pakistan.

The fourth chapter zooms-out a bit from Chakwal and follows the footsteps of new recruits to the northern city of Abbottabad, where the army runs its soldiers’ training facility. After collecting testimonies of people in charge of the facility, trainers and recruits, Rashid expounds on the manufacturing process of a soldier in detail. The way peasant-subjects are turned into soldier-subjects leaves indelible marks on the body and psyche of new recruits. The training is not limited to teaching war skills, but also disciplines bodies and minds by regulating both space and time through repeated drills,
measured movements and strict time management. Bodies, minds, and hearts (feelings) of the young recruits are disciplined in the process that converts them into automatons who can take and implement orders without any hint of doubt or reluctance (p. 95).

13 Though the in-charge of the training center explained at length the utility of strict training of body gestures and movements, the soldiers interviewed by Rashid repeatedly described their experience of training as disturbing on multiple levels. Some compared the experience with entering a prison. However, most of the time they found it hard to articulate their feelings and uneasy thoughts in a clear and comprehensive manner. One of the recruits said that following orders of superior officers caused him zehni koft (mental irritation) (p. 94) but also added that one cannot have appni marzi (free will) in the army (p. 95). For Rashid, this unease is a symptom of the fragmentation of self that is a core objective of the training. The fragmented self resists any impulse on the part of the subject-soldier to comprehend or resist power. Soldiers see (and experience) power as an external framework that enframes everyday occurrences and activities and bars any conscious effort on the part of the subject to demystify power (p. 97).

14 Rashid also brings kinship or biraderi into the discussion of the making of a soldier. Kinship is considered as the most important social and affective bond in the rural social organization of Punjab, as it shapes the molds of self and personhood there (Alvi 2001; Lyon 2019). The training process uses affective conditioning techniques to replace the affective bonds of family and community (village and biraderi) with feelings of loyalty and gratitude to the institution (army) and of camaraderie with fellow soldiers. In the process, the values of izzat (prestige) and ghairat (honor), central to the moral universe of rural Punjab, are replaced with the honor and prestige of the soldiers' respective army units and regiments.

15 These conditioning techniques forever change the subjectivity of soldiers and result in a fragmented self; though sensitive to ingrained feelings of unease and abnormality, this fragmented self finds it hard to articulate reasons underlying this unease. One soldier explained the feeling in the following words:

I don’t think we stay normal. We may look normal. We are disturbed and don’t feel a sense of peace. There is an odd sense of unease. I can’t explain it... Sometimes I am faced with the realization that I am forgetting things. We don’t know what feeling this is... (p. 101)

16 This automaton is a perfect fit for soldiers in the army, in that they are not capable of developing any independent thinking, but are used only to taking orders.

17 The fifth chapter takes the reader back to Pallwal and brings the discussion to a new theme: the aftermath of shahadat (death) of a soldier. The carefully choreographed movements and actions of soldiers accompanying the body (of the dead soldier), and the ambivalent feelings of grief, guilt and loss felt by families are minutely recorded by the author. The contribution of this chapter lies in explicating the contrasting ways death is perceived and felt by the army on the one hand, and by the parents of the deceased on the other. The military paints death as an act of sacrifice and places it in the domain of shahadat, while for parents it becomes a painful event filled with overbearing loss and grief. The army’s narrative of sacrifice and martyrdom juxtaposes a soldier’s death with an aam (common) death and expects a different kind of response from parents. However, the overwhelmingness of the latter’s grief outweighs these anticipations. In fact, this chapter starts with a grief-laden Vaen of a grieving mother sitting by the grave of her young soldier-son, showcasing deep guilt and remorse.
Rashid carefully observes the choreographed actions and movements of soldiers and the responses of parents/relatives to explain the intertwined yet exclusive experiences of grief and death. Right from the arrival of the body to the last rites of burial, the corpse remains in the strict control of the army. Male members of the family are asked by the commanding officer not to weep or cry, but rather to celebrate their becoming a shaheed's parents. Notwithstanding the emphasis on sacrifice, the reactions of families do not always follow the diktats of the army. Sometimes grieving can go wrong (p. 130), resulting in a permanently grief-stricken father found sitting beside the grave of his son (p. 131). However, in most cases grieving, from the point of view of the army, remains within controllable limits. Grieving parents, who in their hearts know that gurbat (poverty) and bhok (hunger) forced them to send their sons into the army, find little solace in the narrative of shahadat, but most of them keep repeating or doing whatever they are told by the officer in-charge. The death of loved ones does not lead to the formation of a subversive narrative in Pallwal. On the contrary, it further consolidates the bond between the military and common residents of the village, especially the families of deceased soldiers. The twin factors of a) the cynical functioning of ideology and b) the promise of welfare inducements (i.e., shuhada allowance) ensure the status quo to the benefit of the army (p. 135).

The sixth chapter dissects and elaborates the flip side of the bargain (Shuhada allowance) that is purposefully kept out of bounds to the general public. Public disclosure would negatively influence the reputation of the institution and its efforts to present military service and death in combat as a selfless act (p. 140). Notwithstanding these concerns and to keep the patron-client relation intact, the institution develops regimes of compensation by converting the accident of death (a loss) into a damage, something that can be measured and then paid for in currency (p. 141). The assessment of the damage puts both families and the institution in a morally ambiguous yet practically symbiotic relationship. According to Rashid, the compensation plays a double role: it not only provides material benefits to families, but also gives meaning to death, both for the institution and for families of deceased soldiers.

The system of compensation in this case closely resembles a traditional gift exchange system encompassing cycles of mutual obligations and reciprocity; the welfare of dependents comes in exchange for the life of son/husband/father. The packages offered to Shuhada include cash grant, pensions, land allotments, children's education funds, and jobs in non-combat departments of military administration. These compensations are comparatively more generous than those offered to civilian shaheeds i.e., the police. Yet the army makes a concerted effort to completely mask such transactions from the public view because it goes against the image of willing selfless sacrifice that the army projects for popular consumption and blanket approval of its larger role in the polity of Pakistan.

Although the theme of the masculine nature of militarism is discussed throughout the book, this chapter also pays closer attention to the social reproduction of gender roles by elucidating the nature of interactions between the military and women relatives of deceased soldiers (mothers and widows). Even though post-death emoluments are registered in the name of the deceased's widows or mothers, Rashid shows that they play no positive role vis-a-vis the autonomy of these women. Rather, with the death of the family patriarch, the state/army transforms itself into a new, institutional patriarch (p. 149) and keeps on reproducing the same gendered roles legitimizing the traditional family ethics that condone and confer strategic decision-making power only to the male.
members of the family. The figure of the widow symbolizes the way the institution plays its part in reproducing gender hierarchies (p. 154). Widows are expected not to remarry and are preferably not invited to ceremonies; in case of re-marriage, their allowances are withdrawn.

22 The seventh chapter examines the least discussed aspect of war and militarism in Pakistan, which is in my view one of the most original contributions of the book. It draws attention to the fate of soldiers who do not die in war but become unfit for military service due to serious physical injuries. They are neither celebrated as martyrs willingly sacrificing their lives, nor can be showcased as masculine tools of violence and war making. As compared to dead soldiers, their injured bodies posit a different type of moral-political dilemma. The performative value of wounded bodies is less stable, writes Rashid, and attracts undesirable attention (p. 162).

23 Injured bodies, rather than arousing emotions of awe and pride, summon pity and fear. Instead of personifying glory in death (and war), they become relics of the horrors of war (p. 165). The removal of such bodies from public view becomes necessary to ensure the stability of the project of militarism. Injured soldiers, as some testimonies collected by the author implied, become a living validation of the loss caused by war and military service (p. 167). Such soldiers also become unfit to signify the masculinity that is central to the image building exercise of the institution. Injured soldiers openly cry over their loss and supposedly show feminine qualities that do not sit well with the masculine self-image of the army (p. 169). They complain about their fate and their choice, but still refuse to dissociate from the military because of the economic security and medical support it offers them.

24 The title of the penultimate chapter is borrowed from a famous poem by Wilfred Owen, PRO PATRIA MORI, meaning “to die for one’s country”. The poem was written during the first world war and was published in 1920 after the death of the poet-soldier. Wilfred criticized the act of dying for one’s country, calling it neither sweet nor honorable. Using this as the title of the chapter, Rashid draws her readers’ attention to an ongoing shift in the army’s narrative of sacrifice, from an overbearing pan-Islamic conception and understanding of sacrifice to a more territorial centric comprehension of nationhood. This shift was triggered by the decision of General Pervaiz Musharraf, in 2001, to support the American invasion of Afghanistan. On the eve of 9/11, he was holding the twin offices of chief of army staff and president of Pakistan when Richard Armitage, in a famous phone call, asked for Pakistan’s cooperation in the so-called War on Terrorism (WoT). The slogan sab se pehly Pakistan (Pakistan first) was a conscious effort on the part of the military regime to distance itself from the legacy of the preceding military regime headed by General Zia ul Haque (1977–1988). Since then religion has become an important part of the ideology of Pakistan due to a) sectarian conflict inspired by Iran-Saudi rivalry and b) the global project of Jihadism launched under General Zia ul Haque in the 1980s (pp. 180–81). Jihadi groups purported and supported by the Pakistani state (along with the United States and Saudi Arabia) during the first phase of Afghan jihad (1980–1990) started to become a burden for Pakistan in the context of the new configuration of WoT.

25 On the basis of her interviews with training instructors, her reading of training manuals and her close observation of the role and position of imams (clergy/prayer leaders) within the institution, Rashid argues that there is a conscious effort on the part of the military to replace the previous singular emphasis on religious martyrdom with the
more composite territorial concept of dying for the homeland. This chapter moves continuously between the training center and the village of Pallwal to explicate the tensions that participation in the War on Terror (WoT) unleashed at institutional and social levels.

26 Notwithstanding the collaborative nature of US-Pakistan efforts, public opinion on the war started to plunge. Deeply entrenched and well-organized religious parties and groups affiliated with sectarian outfits started to contest the decision of joining the American war by calling it a betrayal of both Afghans and Islam.¹⁰

27 Later, relationships between religious militant groups, especially Deobandi¹¹ affiliates, and the Musharraf regime started to grow tense which resulted in a series of suicide attacks on military personnel, leading politicians, and common people. The Peshawar attack on a school that resulted in over a hundred deaths eventually forced the army to launch a well-planned military operation in Swat and the erstwhile FATA¹² districts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The ideological and political tensions that surfaced during this period forced the top army brass to review the policy on jihad and the use of religious vocabulary.

28 The presence of this very tension was salient both in the political discourse and in the environment of Pallwal village. Distinctions in popular discussions were made between asal shaheed (the real martyr) and those who died in fighting religious militants in Swat and FATA. The real martyrs were those who died fighting on Indian borders, while the ambivalence about martyrs of the WoT comes from the fact that the enemy was itself Muslim.

29 Efforts at fusing religious notions of martyrdom with the concept of “dying for the homeland” create new tensions and anxieties inside and outside the army. One key reason for this is the inability of the army to control the doctrinal interpretation of religion or to completely monopolize the use of the title of shahadat. The dependence of the army on the affective repertoire of Islam further complicates the goal of winning the WoT and ending ambiguities about the future course of action regarding state making and nation building (p. 204). The situation becomes even more complicated with the Taliban’s victory in neighboring Afghanistan, as it will further erode the control of the army regarding the use of religious symbols and doctrines to meet its institutional ends.

30 This book is a welcome addition to the corpus of literature on the military, state-formation, and citizenship in Pakistan. It is probably the first scholarly study of the military institution to investigate how the army’s institutional power is converted into social prestige and political power. In the concluding chapter, Rashid concurs that the control of the state apparatus enables the army to develop a technology of rule embedded in religion and mediated by sentiments of sacrifice for the nation that stifles any discussion of its accountability (p. 217). The author manages to lay bare the material-affective mechanisms of power through which the military sustains its domination over state and society. Another contribution of the book lies in forging a unique theoretical and methodological framework that was required to unveil the institutional mechanisms sustaining the social power of the military in Pakistan. It is also illuminating that Rashid uses the case of Pakistan to show the harm that any militaristic state project can bring to the citizens of a country and the world at large. Her book explicitly deals with those affective technologies of rule that resist interrogation due to the attached sacredness behind which national armies hide (p. 217–18).
Although the book opens new vistas of critical scholarship, it does not engage with the economic and institutional changes resulting in a) new configurations of social power challenging the military's hegemony and b) hybrid, neo-liberal subjectivities inspired and legitimized by religious world views and liberal lifestyles (Maqsood 2014). Both processes pose serious questions about the domination of the military over levers of policy and politics.

These shifts might arguably be read as signs of the beginning of the weakening of military’s hegemony in mainland Punjab (Akhtar 2016; Zaidi 2016). The apparent popularity of the political slogan “Vote ko Izzat do” (give respect to vote/voters’ rights) in Punjab, also points to a subtle change in political attitudes towards state and army in Punjab (Rehman and Sattar 2021). Increasing skepticism about the domination of the military on the state, combined with growing fragmentation of its hegemony in Punjab, raises questions about the future of the army as a central fulcrum of Pakistani state. Rashid’s work, which opens new scholarly space by studying the role of affects in structuring military centric state-society relations in Pakistan, is a salient contribution to, and to some extent a consequence of this process.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The Pakistan military consists of three forces: Army, Air Force and Navy. Army here refers only to that part of military that is trained for ground combat. In the case of Pakistan, it is numerically and institutionally the most powerful force. We will use military and army interchangeably in this review.


3. The districts that supplied the largest number of troops to the British were described as “martial districts”.

4. The name was invented by the author to protect the identity of respondents.

5. These performances are so central to the self-image of the military that amidst the third wave of COVID pandemic when social distancing had become a global official norm, the annual parade in the month of March, 2021 was held at full strength.

6. A Punjabi poetic form that is used to express the overwhelmingness of grief.

7. In contrast to public announcements of such emoluments for police or other civilian departments, the military never openly announces the payment of such transfers.

8. Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori (p. 218).

9. General Zia ul Haque was another military dictator who ruled for 11 years (1977–1988).

10. Even popular parties such as Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (Pakistan Justice Party) publicly shunned the decision to support the American war.

11. Deobandis pay allegiance to the theological doctrine pioneered at the Madrassah of Deoband in 1866.

12. Federally Administered Territories were incorporated into the province by a constitutional amendment in 2018.
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