

Book Review

Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption by Rafia Zakaria. W.W. Norton, 2021, 244 pp. \$23.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-324-00661-9

Contemporary Feminist Questions: Review of *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption*

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“You do not have to be white to be a white feminist,” Rafia Zakaria writes in her book, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption* – a book that arrives at a time of urgent conversations and ruminations about the history and role of whiteness globally. Zakaria observes that whiteness is a set of practices rather than a racial identity to argue that a truly fair, equitable, and inclusive feminism is only possible in the absence of white feminism. Zakaria defines a white feminist as “someone who refuses to consider the role that whiteness and the racial privilege attached to it have played and continues to play in universalizing white feminist concerns, agendas, and beliefs as being those of all of feminism and all of the feminists.” As opposed to white feminists, non-White feminists possess experiential and situated knowledge of gendered violence and hence are better positioned to articulate their feminisms. Zakaria introduces this difference to discuss, describe, and prescribe the feminist path forward.

In eight chapters of the book, Zakaria further explores and explains the relationship of whiteness, white feminism, and white feminists with intersecting institutional and structural injustices, particularly gender-based injustice. Zakaria traces the history of the White savior complex via the examples of Eve Ensler’s visit to Congo, Gertrude Bell in Haifa, Mlle. Marguerite Clement in Egypt, Annette Akroyd in Bengal, and the work of Bayle Bernard and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Pointing to the erasure of non-white feminism, she cites Sarojini Naidu, Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, Swarnakumari Devi, Sharda Sadar, and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain to argue that Indian feminists were doing revolutionary work for education, anti-colonial struggle, and women’s rights but their Western counterparts failed to acknowledge them due to their misperceptions about Indian women.

Zakaria shares her own experiences to note that these exclusionary white feminist practices persist even today. She compares the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago with a sort of Global Bazar in the contemporary US to argue that both events, though a century apart, maintain their focus on solely white women’s visibility their achievements. Citing British suffragists’ dismissal of the experiences of brown and black women in British colonies and White American women’s oblivion to the experiences of Black women, she notes that even feminist idols like Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan also bore an “orientalist bigotry” and solidified the centrality of white women in feminist conversations. Contrarily, Kate Millet encouraged “a robust questioning of the foundations of knowledge” via her “irreverence,” “interest in feminist solidarity” and “epistemological skepticism.” But even Millet was not ready for non-white feminism. During her visit to Iran in 1979, veil-wearing, anti-America, anti-West, Muslim Iranian feminists challenged Millet’s feminism. Zakaria further points to the failures of Gloria Steinem, Robin Morgan,

and Angela Davis when it came to extending solidarity to brown and Muslim feminists. Moving past these, she asks: “by bringing together the intellectual tools of Millet’s epistemological skepticism and Crenshaw’s understanding of intersectionality, can a true feminist solidarity finally be born?”

Particularly impressive is Zakaria’s discussion of empowerment: “a process of transforming power relationships between individuals and social groups” or “a collective political power used by grassroots organizations” to “accomplish things.” Empowerment, initially distinct from power, was originally incompatible with the Western idea of “foreign aid” or “development.” But these two concepts became synonymous that in 2000–2001, “empowerment” appeared alongside “opportunity” and “security” in the world bank’s plan for fight against poverty. Not only women’s political resistance was NGO-ized and depoliticized, but their empowerment was also reduced to “business” and strengthened neoliberalism. Similar white feminist beliefs are visible in White women’s, including Gloria Steinem, Eve Ensler, Meryl Streep, and Susan Sarandon, support for war on terror after 9/11. This White feminism is not limited to the US; Sweden, Canada, and other Western/white nations are also complicit. Brown women’s bodies only serve as props to further White women’s careers. These more recent expressions of White feminism are reminiscent of the earlier conversation about Millet in Iran. She further engages with the white feminists’ ideas about Muslim communities in her conversation about honor killings and FGM practices.

Zakaria argues that honor in a “collectivist society” takes the form of “ego” in an “individualist society,” though both remain “iterations of the same forces of patriarchal dominance.” White people perceive violence in non-Western countries as a fault of their culture or religion, but violence in white countries as an individual aberration. Particularly insightful is Zakaria’s discussion of the “dynamic and responsive” Muslim justice system in the pre-colonial era, which was replaced by the unified British law and later Islamic law – practically erasing the possibility of contextual legal decisions. While “White feminists in the colonial era were all about spreading their civilized ways,” “neo-colonial white feminists want to illustrate their courage and compassion—often while providing moral subsidy for cruelties inflicted in feminism’s name.” White feminism hasn’t changed much over time as its commitment “to extracting value wherever it can—and dominating the narrative to frame this extraction as benevolence—persists.” Throughout the book, Zakaria does an impressive job of maintaining the balance between histories of feminism and contemporary feminist practices.

Zakaria argues for a feminist space where “different [feminist] tribes can work together on issues that affect us all—and, vitally, where they can lend one another equally ardent support for issues that do not affect us all,” while simultaneously be able to “remain free to have their specialized groups” but without “reduc[ing] their capacity or potential for coming together to create a potent and transformative mainstream feminist politics.” Occasionally, she resorts to academic language making some parts rather inaccessible for a non-academic reader. The book uses white feminism as its center to point to the systemic erasure, exclusions, and dismissals of brown, black, and other non-white feminisms. With its thorough research and discussion, the book remains a comprehensive exploration of the role of white feminism in feminist histories rather than a revolutionary prescription for the feminist futures. Zakaria’s invitation for white feminists to reflect over white feminist practices and carve out space for brown, black, and other non-white feminisms is urgent and relevant for contemporary global conversations and practices of women’s rights.