

# CONTESTED REPRESENTATION

**Punjabi Women in  
Feminist Debate  
in Pakistan**

**Tahmina Rashid**

OXFORD

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*Dedicated  
To  
My Family*

## FOREWORD

It is a great pleasure and a privilege to have been asked to write the foreword to Tahmina Rashid's study of Punjabi women's struggles. My respect and admiration for her compassion, understanding and scholarship concerning women's circumstances in Pakistan has grown over the years. I believe that in this book, she reconciles the individual and collective agency of lower class Punjabi women's struggles within a universal analysis of women's agency and activism. In doing so, she recuperates the voices of the marginalised in similar terms as does the scholarship associated with the Subaltern Studies group and some of the work of postcolonial feminists.

Although many feminists, past and present, have treated lower class and lower middle class women as a 'silent majority', Tahmina's research shows these women are anything but a silent or passive majority in their struggle to meet their needs and interests. Tahmina encountered rural and urban women who are vocal and articulate in expressing their concerns about a range of development, religious and cultural issues: economic empowerment, mobility, the availability of girls' schools and girls' rights to education, health issues, violence against women, choice of dress, purdah, dowry, divorce, inheritance rights, and men's control of women's sexuality and body.

At one point, the author refers to such women as living in a state of 'political, social and economic crises' and throughout provides statistical and testamentary evidence. It is a chilling statement but what else can one surmise when women's freedom is so constrained under belief systems supported by state and religious laws and structures, and gender bias so deeply entrenched throughout Pakistani society. From the time of Independence, Pakistan has seen successive governments oscillate between discriminatory laws that curtail women's presence in the public domain and attempts to liberalise and reform laws in the interests of women. Tahmina is critical, however, that women's organizations and activism, driven by middle class women's interests, has failed to achieve any significant improvement in the lives of the majority of women living in poorer circumstances.

Class analysis has lost its saliency in recent years. It is refreshing and instructive to see Tahmina recuperate such an analysis in order to study the relationships between lower and lower middle class, on the one hand, and middle class women, on the other. It is the urban-based, middle class women who 'drive' women's organizations on the basis of their purported understanding of **all** women's oppression. Their activism narrowly focuses on legalistic means by which to address women's discrimination, but these are insufficient to address the problems of the majority of Punjabi women and have the added limitation—so common elsewhere in women's activism—of engaging in 'maternal imperialism', that is, speaking for 'the poor', 'the illiterate'. Having spent considerable time with street theatre groups who travel through urban and rural areas of the Punjab, Tahmina finds that they adopt a community development approach to communicating through the vernacular, in raising awareness about the interrelated contexts of oppression—class, gender and ethnic—in aiming for attitudinal and practical change at the grassroots level. Whole communities are thus drawn (potentially) into debate and action.

Tahmina writes of the difficulty in identifying her role as a researcher in relation both to the participants in this study and the literature dealing with the 'politics of location'. Yet, she is at once 'of the community' (with a rural, Punjabi background) and 'not of the community' (educated, a professional, and now living abroad) and indeed **makes** a place for herself within feminist scholarship.

Lucy Healey  
Melbourne



## PREFACE

Pakistan, as a post-colonial Muslim State, has been struggling to deal with human rights issues. Women's activism in Pakistan has a complex history, beginning with nationalism, moving into post-independence concerns about the impoverished population, then turning its attention to the Islamisation of laws in the 1980s and their impact on women in Pakistan. The Zia regime of the 1980s embarked upon a series of measures designed to undermine women's legal rights, educational and career opportunities as well as the basic rights for freedom of movement and protection from molestation by males. This struggle resulted in the establishment of a strong middle-class, urban-based women's activism, namely, the Women Action Forum (WAF). The women's movement made a dramatic impact on Pakistan's political scene and the earlier attitude of not offending the male-dictated social customs took a new turn. Women's activism shifted from the drawing room of the upper classes to the offices and homes of middle class professionals. A number of women's organisations came together in this struggle against the dehumanisation of women in the name of Islam. However, fairly quickly a split occurred in WAF and a number of non-governmental organisations surfaced. It also led to the formulation of street theatre groups, such as Ajoka and Lok Rhas, that have been successful in conveying their human rights message to rural areas through street theatre productions. However, they often have a varied approach, as they either focus on women's rights discourse or examine women's oppression as a class issue, merging female identity in the identity of an oppressed class.

Women issues have remained at the periphery, as they have been given a lower status in almost all societal settings. Women are considered the custodians of religious, social and cultural practices. In the changing socio-political environment, the status of women has undergone many changes. The nature of public space available to women was continually transformed, as a result of changing regimes and activities of women activists, propagators of human rights and conservative religious elements. Gender issues have been examined from various perspectives; however, lower/lower middle class women

remain absent from the agendas presented by both scholars and activists.

This book examines the history of women's activism in Pakistan particularly the changes occurring since the 1980s, with reference to the role of lower/lower middle class Punjabi women. The study explores women's activism from the perspective of class, ethnicity and gender relations. I have conducted extensive fieldwork in rural/urban Punjab and listened to the concerns and issues relevant to lower/lower middle class women, in order to articulate their perceptions regarding the existing gendered hierarchies, women's project, female agency, and indigenous ways to deal with these concerns.

I have explored the relationship between class, location and gender in Pakistan, as a deeply entrenched class bias operates at almost all levels of society. Women of the lower classes, especially in rural and semi urban areas, have a divergent view of development and gender hierarchies, which are further inflicted by their ethnic identity. I have examined the degree to which lower class women are responding to the messages conveyed by women's organisations, the theatre medium and local communities and the manner in which these agencies promote the concerns of women located in different societal settings. I have briefly analysed the impact of foreign aid and funding on the agendas of women's organisations, and conclude that most of them are unsustainable without these donations and grants.

I have investigated the significance of lower class women's activism, as the history of Pakistan is silent about them and focuses on the contribution and role of middle class urban minority. How they want their voices integrated into the larger women's project needs to be examined, as the role of women can no longer be determined only by using top down approaches. Other ways of formulating a strategy for female agency in Pakistan need to be explored; and this is the aim of my research.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted from the bottom of my heart and unable to find suitable words to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Verity Burgmann, Department of Political Science, The University of Melbourne, Australia. Without her support, encouragement and assistance I would have not been able to complete my work in time. She is a gem of a person as a human being as well as a wonderful scholar who keeps others motivated. She continuously accommodated my personal concerns and remained a continuous source of inspiration. I feel honoured for being able to work with her for a number of years.

I am very grateful also to Associate Professor Maila Stivens, Director Women Studies Program, University of Melbourne, for her detailed examination of my work. Her expertise, critique as well as assistance to locate relevant references were of vital help.

My particular thanks to Dr Lucy Healey, formerly associated with Women Studies Program, the University of Melbourne, for her assistance in clarifying my research project in the initial stages. Her valuable suggestions about how to formulate my questionnaire and explore the possibility of informal and thematic interviews with the women of the Punjab greatly facilitated my research.

My special thanks to Professor Mark Considine, for always greeting me with a smile and finding solutions to many of my concerns. Professor Brian Galligan deserves special thanks for facilitating the logistics of my travel to Pakistan on my second field trip that helped me evaluate and contact many of my participants again.

The Department of Political Science, in the University of Melbourne became my second home in Australia. I owe a lot to Ben Harper, Wendy Ruffles and Natalie for their assistance in daily affairs, particularly with the photocopier and printer.

It goes beyond saying that the University of Melbourne has a resource-rich library with approachable staff to facilitate researchers. The Baillieu and ERC library staff deserve special thanks for their help and assistance.

I would have not been able to financially support my studies, particularly my field research, without the MRS Scholarship from the University of Melbourne, various travel and fieldwork grants from the Scholarships Office, Faculty of Arts, and the Department of Political Science Fieldwork grant. Generous fieldwork grants, particularly the Asia Fieldwork Grant, made my life easier, at least in financial terms, throughout my field study.

The support network of the School of Graduate Studies through various skill programs as well as professional help from Sabina Robertson to search databases and resources needs special acknowledgement.

Lastly, I owe a lot to my family, especially to my little daughter Manahil and my husband Saeed for being so understanding. She spent the early years of her life with me in libraries and accompanied me throughout my fieldwork. Her smiles kept me motivated, though I may not live to fulfill her dream that her mum should write a hundred books. My family and friends in Australia and Pakistan facilitated my inquiry and research, and I offer my thanks to all those who participated in this study in any capacity.

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

There is a popular perception in Pakistan that women's rights activism is the hobby of 'bored upper class housewives'. However, women involved in activism see such comments as unfair and argue that they are seriously committed to a struggle to improve the lot of oppressed women in Pakistan. As a student of political science, I have the advantage of being able to study Punjabi society from an insider's perspective. I have strong links with my rural background, have lived in various urban areas of the Punjab, and closely observed various dynamics of rural and urban lives. As a postgraduate student I have both observed and experienced the regressive social changes that have occurred since the imposition of the oppressive military regime of Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s; and the gradual recuperation to improve the condition of Punjabi women. My daily contact with young people and my experience of teaching in various institutions has helped me to understand the changes that have taken place as a result of the Islamisation of the laws by the military regime and the gradual rise of conservatism in Punjabi society. At the same time there have been countervailing developments. Although many of the participants in my research project differed on changing social attitudes towards women, I have become aware, both as an insider and an outside observer, of the subtle social changes in the role and status of women as a result of gaining access to the internet, cable TV and the process of globalisation. These changes are gradually becoming more visible and one can observe the increasing number of women working in the public arena. Women who have acquired a new public role are of the view that the opening of new avenues, opportunities and public space for women through the process of globalisation has proven to be a parallel social movement in opposition to the rise of conservatism. The images from cable TV in many people's lounge-rooms and bedrooms have muted traditional reactions to western materialistic culture and western dress;

and so attitudes regarding the 'appropriate' public dress for women have slowly changed.

The post 9/11 international scene has raised questions regarding Islamic identity and has brought changes in the local, as well as the international systems. I have observed both the 'talibanisation' of society and a parallel liberation in some urban areas, although such changes are not the focus of my research. I noticed these changes in both rural and urban settings and changing attitudes among women who have access to dish antennas, cable networks and internet. Attitudes amongst women living in urban centres tend to reflect the opportunities available to them, whereas rural women in general were concerned with their own situation, especially the lack of basic services such as education and health; Furthermore they were concerned, with the attitude of urban women and frequently expressed their resentments, which I discuss in chapter 6. These complex changes and the feminist activism that is taking place in urban areas spurred my interest in the current situation of women in the Punjab.

## **Central propositions**

Women's rights activism in Pakistan has mainly addressed the concerns of middle-class and elite women. The local human rights discourse has been 'monovocal', failing to express the diversity amongst women in their urban and rural settings and their widely differentiated class locations. I intend to explore the links between class location and female agency in Pakistan, a research angle that has been inadequately treated in the literature on women's activism.

## **Significance of the study**

The history of Pakistan is rife with instances where women joined forces and formed alliances to mobilise and harness their special abilities to champion their specific interests or social concerns. The activities of such groups have ranged from social welfare, economic, political and legal equality. Many women's organizations express a desire to bring change that would ensure gender equity in social, political and legal arenas. These women's Organizations recognise gender-based inequalities stemming from the patriarchal structures,

such as legal rights and religious discourses confirming male superiority, but ignore class-based inequalities amongst women. During my field study, I observed that regardless of education level, there is a common belief amongst Punjabi women that it is urgent and essential to raise social awareness about the existing gender inequalities, identify the reasons and collectively pursue solutions within and outside the existing norms and beliefs of society. This belief has sustained both the intellectual and the practical efforts that are an integral part of women's rights struggles in Pakistan. Since the Islamisation of laws in the 1980s, the objectives and strategies of these struggles have included a desire for empowerment and equality before law, representation, and liberation from subordination and oppressive social conditions and cultural practices such as honour killings etc.

Although the term 'women's movement' has been used in many studies conducted by Pakistani and other scholars, the term 'movement' is nonetheless problematic. A movement may be defined as an organised and cohesive effort to achieve a desired end or a specific cause. In the case of a women's movement, it entails women in general coming together to attain a common purpose. Many Pakistani scholars, feminists and activists believe that the struggle for women's rights failed to evolve and engage lower class women, who form the majority of the population; therefore it is more appropriate to call it a struggle rather than a movement, so I have opted to use the term 'activism' and 'struggles' rather than 'movement' for the purposes of this research. If we examine the history of social movements in Pakistan and other parts of the globe it seems that the argument is substantial and relevant. During the national liberation struggle for the creation of Pakistan, women involved themselves in the more or less conscious hope of obtaining some recognition of their identity and rights, but such hopes turned to disillusion once the freedom struggle was over.<sup>1</sup> Based on my fieldwork analysis, I shall show that a consciousness of women's struggles and their projects for rights, awareness and agency can only be found in small pockets of the Punjab. On the other hand, there is a growing awareness among women about their need for, education and health facilities and services, both in rural and urban settings.

Women's activism in Pakistan has a deeply rooted upper-middle-class bias, largely due to the continuing legacy of the British colonial period in the Indian sub-continent. In the early years after independence, various development plans introduced by the State ignored lower and lower middle women, which resulted in sharpening the urban-rural