


## Pious Peripheries: Runaway Women in Post-Taliban Afghanistan

Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021). Pp. 256. \$26.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503614710

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Since the beginning of the Global War on Terror (2001–), Afghan women have preoccupied the global imagination as either passive victims of repressive cultures or figures of resilience who persevere in the face of unbridled suffering. While attempts have been made in the social sciences to destabilize this binary framework, scholarship continues to treat Afghan women as one-dimensional subjects. In fact, over the past two decades, “Afghan women” has become a kind of heuristic concept that is routinely employed when analyzing the foundational logics of the War on Terror (i.e. how it justified its militarized intervention through the “saving Afghan women” narrative) but rarely expanded upon. Despite the intention toward political critique, the use of “Afghan women” has over time converted actual people into convenient epistemes, thereby further objectifying them. This is precisely why Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi’s *Pious Peripheries* is a much-needed contribution that takes the study of Afghan women out of the realm of the conceptual and into the ethnographic.

Based on participant observation and interviews at a Kabul women’s shelter in the mid-2010s, the book examines the everyday lives, struggles, and dilemmas of Pashtun women who have run away from gender-based and sexual violence and now live in a local shelter (*khana-yi aman*). This book’s deep ethnographic insights resist the binary of cultural oppression or resilience. Rather, they reveal that in running away, women both subvert and recommit to certain patriarchal logics. What becomes clear is that their decisions are thoughtful and part of an ongoing engagement with Islam, the state, and other figures and institutions of authority. Ahsan-Tirmizi’s ethnography shows that women exist neither as passive victims nor resilient superheroes, but rather as complicated subjects who constantly unsettle the binary of modernity and tradition through reimagining Islamic feminism, state projects of womanhood, and feminist literary traditions.

In the introduction, Ahsan-Tirmizi argues that in running away from their natal or marital families, women enact alternative modes of piety and womanhood that are best conceptualized as inhabiting a “promiscuous modern.” The author deploys the concept of promiscuity strategically and in doing so, opens up new ways of thinking about what it means to be a transgressive subject in a deeply patriarchal society. Beginning with a term that has been used against her interlocutors allows Ahsan-Tirmizi to avoid equating promiscuity with immorality and, conversely, piety with morality. While promiscuity signals how women in the shelter engage in transgressive behaviors, it also points to how they refashion themselves and their worlds in excess of prescribed state or social categories. The introduction also carefully and thoughtfully establishes that the act of running away is not only an escape from power but an entering into different power relations including juridical and state power.

Chapter 1 (“The Shelter”) examines the background of the *khana-yi aman*, and the NGOs that run the shelter. Chapter 2 (“Portraits of Pain”) delves into the experiences of runaway women in court as they attempt to resolve family disputes. Chapter 3 (“Poetic Risk”) looks at shelter residents’ engagements with *landay*, poems which subvert sexual and gendered norms through witty and lyrical critiques of the patriarchal social order. Chapter 4 (“Taliban’s Women”) the author examines the “microhistories of the runaway wives and daughters” of members of the Taliban as they reclaim their financial and marital rights



in the wake of being abandoned. Chapter 5 (“Pedagogies of Womanhood”) provides an intellectual genealogy of texts on Muslim female piety that situate women’s honor and reproductive capacities as objects of nationalist agendas. The final chapter (“Subject of Honor”) examines how *Pashtunwali* as a set of contested and formal and informal discursive traditions offers potential starting points for a more radical politics of sanctuary, refuge, and hospitality which runaway women enact with each other.

There is only so much ground one ethnography can cover and I appreciate the author’s close-up focus on how women navigate both intimate and structural forms of violence. However, there were areas the book could have explored in greater depth. For example, there is a suggestion in Chapter 1 that the shelter has a complicated relationship to the Afghan state and to the international NGO landscape. In the wake of precarious fundings streams and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs distancing itself from the shelter, the shelter’s managers tenaciously sought to keep the shelter operative through appeals to the United Nations and other global development nonprofits. While it is clear the shelter and the women’s networks that sustained it have a history that predates the Global War on Terror, further sustained analysis on the war’s impact would have provided greater contextual depth. This is briefly explored in Chapter 4, in which Ahsan-Tirmizi suggests that feminist activists have historically tried to negotiate what it means to be a “female citizen in a cryptocolonial state within which a powerful shadow permeates all institutional frameworks” (p. 133). This is an insightful assertion, and further elaboration on this may have brought out how imperial formations are at play at the level of subjectivity and state structures. This was also a good starting point to delve deeper into the entanglements between the Taliban and imperial political and economic interests (which include but also go beyond the US and the West), so that the reader could fully appreciate the transnational forces that produce the conditions of abandonment and “killability” (p. 124) under which runaway women live.

Ahsan-Tirmizi writes that this ethnography aims to understand women’s forms of protest on their own terms rather than as responses to Western intervention. However, to incorporate an analysis of empire would not necessarily mean privileging the West as the reference point. By contrast, it would reconcile with the book’s objective to fully appreciate how women come to inhabit pious subjectivities that exceed nationalist, Islamist, and imperial projects of womanhood. Examining the Afghan state’s variegated alliances with imperial projects around womanhood would extend Ahsan-Tirmizi’s deeply nuanced Foucauldian approach throughout the book which conceptualizes the promiscuous subject as conditioned (but not always fully limited) by other matrices of power including *Pashtunwali* and Islam.

This book is an ethnographically rich and powerful analysis and will leave a profound impact on the reader, not only in its documentation of women’s stories, but in its prompts to expand our horizon of inquiry. Ahsan-Tirmizi writes, “What would happen if we shift the question from ‘Why are women killed?’ to ‘Why do women choose to run away?’” (pp. 202–3). This book reads as an ode to the women who may not conventionally be recognized as activists, but who are enacting an alternative politics of solidarity, community, and personhood in their everyday choices. This book is also refreshing in that it conveys to the reader that caring about Afghan women does not have to mean “saving them.” Here, to spotlight the structures of violence under which women live is not to dismiss their capacity to enact emancipatory modes of being. To care about women’s lives is to care enough to develop a historically and ethnographically nuanced understanding of their everyday concerns, joys, tragedies, and hopes. This book refuses universalisms but also refuses to look away. It will be of great interest to interdisciplinary scholars and students interested in the politics of gender and sexuality in Afghanistan and the wider region, as well as the anthropology of subjectivity, religion, ethics, and violence.