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Khoja-Moolji, S. (2021). Sovereign attachments: Masculinity, Muslimness, and affective politics in Pakistan

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Shenila Khoja-Moolji's latest book, in its critique of the concept of sovereignty, provides a fresh perspective on the intertwining of politics and gender. Sovereignty is generally attributed to the state, yet nonstate actors often make claims to sovereignty as well. In *Sovereign Attachments: Masculinity, Muslimness, and Affective Politics in Pakistan*, Khoja-Moolji posits that all claimants to sovereignty must engage in continuous public performances to legitimize their sovereignty in relation to other competing actors. Focusing on the Pakistani state and the Taliban as contenders for sovereignty in postcolonial Pakistan, Khoja-Moolji explores the vast cultural productions that the two entities mobilize to perform sovereignty. In doing so, she unveils how these competing sovereigns utilize the same prevailing scripts of gender, sexuality, and normative Islam to assert their claims. Specifically, the book centers around Khoja-Moolji's concept of "Islam masculinity," which she coins to describe how both the Pakistani state and the Taliban solidify their claims and foster attachments to their respective projects by performing masculinity and Muslimness.

Khoja-Moolji organizes her book around particular figurations, which she unpacks to "discover the terms, registers, and affects through which sovereign attachments unfold in Pakistani public culture" (2021, p. 24). In the first part of the book, each chapter centers on different personifications of sovereign power. In the opening chapter, Khoja-Moolji studies the head of the state, analyzing the political autobiographies of three Pakistani leaders and unearthing their specific performances of Islam masculinity aimed at nurturing allied publics. In the next chapter, the soldier emerges as the central figuration, to whom the Pakistani army fosters attachment by juxtaposing him against the militant. Through Khoja-Moolji's reading of the army's

texts, it becomes clear that the soldier's hypermasculine strength and proper interpretation of Islam only gain clarity in relation to the militant as his antithesis. Similarly, as discussed in the third chapter, the figuration of the mujahid is mobilized in Taliban magazines through expressions of Muslimness and masculinity, while the state is dispelled from the Taliban's intended space of control, the *umma*, and transformed into a justified target of Taliban violence. These three chapters convincingly highlight the resemblance of distinct performances of Islamo-masculinity among competing sovereigns.

In the second part of her book, Khoja-Moolji turns to figurations of women and considers how relationships of sovereignty are "intensified through gendered labor, kinship feelings, and memory work" (2021, p. 123). She first focuses on the militant and military women that are displayed in the Taliban and army's women-targeted publications. Interestingly, her analysis highlights how both the Taliban and state similarly use language grounded in religion and sacrifice to call on women to subordinate themselves and thus, advance the Islamo-masculinist assertions rooted in their respective political movements. The following chapter examines women as *betis* (daughters) and *behans* (sisters), whose honor is transformed into that of the *umma* and nation. These kinship metaphors can expand the scope of the Taliban and state's sovereignty, legitimizing violence that is carried out to protect the *beti* and *behan*. Khoja-Moolji reveals how through these same kinship feelings and the resulting paternal and fraternal publics, women can also become a site of reprimand and discipline.

Notably, as Khoja-Moolji highlights through the example of specific Pakistani demonstrations, the people themselves can adopt the same metaphors to shame and contest a sovereign, while undertaking its functions of protection. Khoja-Moolji builds on this potential disruption of sovereign attachments and the development of counterpublics in the next chapter by contrasting how mothers respond to the loss of their sons in war or crises. While both the state and the Taliban prefer the figure of the mourning mother who is eventually able to detach from her loss and reattach to the sovereign, in some cases, the mother is unwilling to let go and instead exhibits politicized melancholia and resistance. Khoja-Moolji uses these differing responses to

grief, with the former's appropriate affect management and the latter's rejection of the collective scripts of sacrifice, to shed light on the fragility of sovereign attachments. Thus, Khoja-Moolji effectively reinforces her starting point that sovereignty is something that must be constantly nurtured and renegotiated.

Khoja-Moolji's book, with its focused context and excellent feminist analysis, illuminates the complex dynamics of sovereignty, forcing the reader to move beyond visible sovereign contests of violence and to consider those contests that occur in the cultural sphere. Her ambitious efforts to reveal the convergence of two antagonistic entities will prove beneficial for future studies on sovereignty and masculinity, as they encourage an understanding of the overlaps that emerge in competing performances of sovereignty. These patterns that uncover the fluidity of sovereignty also unlock the path for the examination of political estrangements, as Khoja-Moolji forcefully demonstrates, and thus the imagination of new attachments.

References

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