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Book Review

Sisters in the Mirror: A History of Muslim Women and the Global Politics of Feminism

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Metaphorically, a mirror can be many things. Often a means for self-reflection and moral judgment, it is also considered a reliable reflection of events. But a mirror, as Elora Shehabuddin's *Sisters in the Mirror: A History of Muslim Women and the Global Politics of Feminism* insightfully shows, can also distort. Elementary physics tells us that even the slightest bend in the frame can easily alter a mirror's reflection. Herein, I think, lies the main thrust of Shehabuddin's book. The women who figure in this sweeping tale of feminist encounters not only see their own reflections in the mirror, but they also see their own likeness being refracted through the images of other women. In other words, *Sisters in the Mirror* utilizes the metaphoric possibilities of the "mirror" to craft a narrative of feminist worldmaking that truly spans *saat samudra tero nodi*, the endless imaginary horizon of seven seas and thirteen rivers.

Shehabuddin's book "is a feminist story about how changing global and local power disparities—between Europeans and Bengalis, between Brahmos, Hindus, and Muslims within Bengal, between feminists of the Global North and South; and between Western and Muslim feminists—have shaped ideas about change in women's lives and also the strategies by which to enact change" (pg. 9). From Munni Begum at the court of the Nawab of Bengal to Mahmuda Khanum in the United States in the 1950s, the characters here are women who managed to forge unexpected solidarities but also created unforeseen friction. Some have been misunderstood, others celebrated, most others barely remembered. Shehabuddin approaches their texts with genuine curiosity and rigorous research. Both words and silences are valued for what they are—symptoms of the tectonic shifts that were taking place in the social and political contexts in which these women lived and thrived. Their stories are proof that "no society has the monopoly on ideas about justice and fairness or for that matter, on male bias, violence, and injustice" (pg. 10)—a simple, yet grievously neglected assertion that, alas, still demands constant reiterating, a task *Sisters in the Mirror* accomplishes with considerable flair.

The book progresses chronologically covering centuries' worth of material including documents, fictional and pedagogical writing, oral histories, and photographs. Geographically, it straddles the boundaries of Europe, the Indian Subcontinent, the Middle East, and the United States. The research follows women and men who have crossed many real and metaphoric borders in their quest for reform, liberation, education, and revolution. The results have been as varied as the backgrounds of the book's spirited interlocutors. Here, we see early English feminism reconstituting the plight of the English women by comparing themselves to the "oppressed" Eastern women. In the latter half of the 18th century, European women emerged as the standard against which to measure civilizational progress. In a familiar irony, however, this new-found respect barely translated into actual political, legal, and economic rights. "As the idea of middle-class woman diffused throughout English society, a mirror image of the Muslim woman as the negative ideal came into ever sharper focus." Even Mary Wollstonecraft was not immune. The famous feminist identified "eastern life" with debauchery, frivolity, luxury, weakness, and idleness against which the contours of Englishness was imagined and expressed. As imperial forces accrued more power and territories in the following centuries, civilizational discourses directly informed policies around women's status and rights in the colonies whose reverberations carried far beyond decolonization.

Around the same time Bengali Muslims as a category emerged through that quintessential tool of imperial governance – the census. The 1871 census revealed the surprising fact that the 20.6 million Muslims in the province of Bengal and Assam constituted over half of the Muslim population in British India, making Bengalis the largest Muslim group in the subcontinent. It also resulted in the first official count of women in Bengal. Soon, the new century

saw the active engagement of Muslim Bengali women, several emerging as women's rights activists. It is not surprising that Rokeya Hossain, a stalwart of Bengali feminism, appears here in all her glory. Education, as Hossain and other native feminists made clear, was far more than literacy. It was the very means to women's presence and participation in society. Not surprisingly, *purdah* dominated the discourses of liberation when it came to outside observers. However, as Shehabuddin shows, Muslim women's concerns and resolutions were both more subtle and eminently more complex than the ready association between unveiling and emancipation that dogged even the most thoughtful foreign observers.

Sisters in the Mirror makes its strongest case for a re-reading of global feminist encounters in Chapters 5 and 6. In the shadows of the Cold War and against the perils of a divided world, Muslim feminists joined hands to address issues such as women's education and men's license to take multiple wives. What emerges through these stories of struggle is also the power and potential of South-South solidarity. As concerns over *purdah* gave way to Western feminist preoccupation with abortion, population control, and family planning, third world feminists met in places such as Dhaka, Lahore, Mexico City, Beijing, and elsewhere on various occasions at times to support and at others to challenge the developmental shift in thinking about women's rights. It was no surprise that newly independent Bangladesh became the largest recipient of international population-control funds that made up a substantial share of the national budget. At the dawn of the *War on Terror* era that resurrected Islam as the new enemy, global feminism increasingly tied modernity – or at least Muslim moderation – to neoliberal and neoconservative agendas.

The mastery of *Sisters in the Mirror* is reflected in the ease with which its author moves through an exceptionally large canvas. While the effort seems organic, Shehabuddin is also unapologetic in her privileging of Bengali Muslim feminists. The move here is both ideological and methodological. While redressing silences is a classic feminist move, starting from a different standpoint, such as Muslim Bengal, holds a powerful mirror to existing studies of transnational feminists. What we gain is a fascinating story of passion, politics, and possibilities. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the past that comes to life in *Sisters in the Mirror* is the condition of our possibility, certainly the author's and mine, but also of millions of others. It is a story that merits global attention.

Each of the eight chapters in *Sisters in the Mirror* can stand on its own. If its 400 or more pages seem daunting, the book can also be read in parts without missing out on the larger argument. A work of staggering research, the book will be of great interest to scholars in multiple areas of study including feminism, imperialism, comparative politics, development, South Asian Islam, and Bangladesh Studies.