

RESPONSE TO “AGAINST WHITE FEMINISM” FOR SYMPOSIUM AND SPECIAL ISSUE OF SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

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This is a profoundly important book. It is also incredibly timely. It blends the personal and the political in a way that is seamless and offers a model of how the personal is in fact the political, and vice versa. What is particularly important about this book is that it asks to be both brought within academic circles as well as expanded out toward a more general readership. I hope that with this intervention and overall collective efforts we can help spread the message of this book in all the myriad directions in which it needs to reach.

For the purposes of this intervention, I will not lay out the main arguments of the book but urge everyone to read it for themselves. Given the way that its argument unfolds, I assure you that it is worth your time. What I will do instead is pull out some salient themes that the author advances which may serve as useful guideposts for future readers before I move into offering some examples to support those themes. Let me say broadly that, for the most part, the author neither commits to nor reveals a lot about what her personal positions or experiences might be. This may sound contradictory at first, because it seems that this book is both political as it develops from personal experience and is also very much led by a thoughtful reflection on those personal experiences. Interestingly though, the fact that the author does not commit to a position or reveal what she believes does not detract from the strength of her arguments. It is instead a strength of the way that the argument must unfold. This means that in many ways it should not be necessary for her audience to demand that she

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commits to revealing more about herself and her experiences and her opinion on particular debates. This is a good thing. It also reinforces her entrance into these spaces because a reader should not need to know more about how a minority woman comes to engage in these debates and domains than a white woman. This makes an enormous amount of sense and is in many ways fair. If, a white woman during the colonial era or a feminist in the current era would neither be asked to share nor declare her own stance and personal choices on issues that she is working on professionally then neither should the author. It is a key strength of this book that the author can engage with arguments without having to feel that she needs to reveal her personal choices and stances on issues. Her opening vignette is a case in point where she describes an evening with other feminists at a wine bar in New York.¹ Without giving too much away, she declines a drink from the shared sangria pitcher, nurses a single Diet Coke, and yet does not really tell us whether she consumes alcohol or not until the very end of the vignette.² This seems right such that to have an opinion and to recount her personal experience she has kept the focus rightly on her female companions that evening. She kept her focus on how these feminist women allowed her to pay for the sangria—in other words—how they treated other people outside of a certain dominant group, in that case.

One of the arguments that Zakaria makes very cogently is that the history of exploitation and of looking at colonized cultures as inferior is embedded into the structure of modern-day feminism, making it the dominant form of feminism as defined and inhabited by white women.³ A particularly striking and powerful example that she gives is the idea that some crimes, typically emerging from other cultures, are more morally reprehensible than others.⁴ For instance, honor killings among Muslim majority societies draw heavier scrutiny.⁵ Similarly, she draws parallels between the perception towards honor killings to the understanding and configuration of Sati during the colonial era.⁶ She draws two implications from these examples, the historical and the current, and points out that one of the things that this bias does is that it somehow denotes Brown or Black women as being unable to curtail the worst cultural practices of their own cultures such that they are somehow unable to civilize the men in their

1. RAFIA ZAKARIA, *AGAINST WHITE FEMINISM: NOTES ON DISRUPTION 1-2* (2021).

2. *Id.* at 10.

3. *Id.* at 11.

4. *See id.* at 140-67.

5. *Id.* at 141.

6. *Id.* at 145.

societies.⁷ At the same time, what this bias also does is that it shields white women and white feminists from the vast number of crimes against women that exist in white majority societies. Drawing on her legal training, she then offers the example of the heat of passion defense in American criminal law and how the way that that should be understood is very much in line with these other crimes against women committed in lands overseas.⁸ So, Zakaria identifies a failure by white women and white feminists to acknowledge that there is much that is anti-women in their own societies which leads to terrible crimes that the legal system enables. Meanwhile, this approach allows them the room and space and moral superiority of being able to work overseas because there they are working to end terrible crimes endemic to those cultures and societies.⁹ This mindset and approach that Zakaria cogently points out has this powerful dual shielding effect, as it were, and is both an intellectual and moral failure to compare like tendencies wherever they may be found. Overall, such inherent but perhaps unseen and unacknowledged contradictions are something Zakaria is very keen to point out and, in this instance, does so very clearly and effectively.

As has been noted in other contexts, the charge of terrorism is more easily applied to brown and black perpetrators in Western societies as an indictment of an entire group or religion captured broadly by Islamophobia.¹⁰ In contrast, acts of terror perpetrated by white men in white majority societies in the West are often portrayed as the feelings of the particular individuals charged with crimes who may sometimes belong to particular radicalized groups.¹¹ This is especially the case in the context of the January 6, 2020 attack on the U.S. Capitol. Radicalized groups who entered the building have been characterized as belonging to particular white majoritarian racist groups such that their actions are not conceived nor portrayed as somehow an indictment of broader white and Western society.¹² Further, no link is directly made from the perpetrators to Christian fundamentalism or some kind of religious fundamentalism that could have driven their actions. When Brown and Black men act, their actions are quite easily and certainly more directly portrayed as stemming from significant moral failings of their culture, religion, and society more broadly. There is then a very clear dividing line in our conceptual analysis

7. *Id.* at 154-55.

8. *Id.* at 154.

9. *Id.* at 156.

10. *Id.* at 110.

11. *Id.* at 166.

12. See Brian Duignan, *January 6 U.S. Capitol Attack*, BRITANNICA (Feb. 15, 2023), <https://www.britannica.com/event/January-6-U-S-Capitol-attack>.

of the motivators of one kind of violence versus another which has significant impacts not only for those societies, but also for the work that may be done to counter such injustices across other societies.¹³ The kind of world Zakaria envisages building is one where white feminism can acknowledge the harms that are hidden within it that disable it from being able to do a clear-eyed conceptual analysis in a way that allows a more progressive agenda to be developed. She explains that only then can broad and intersectional coalitions be built within and across societies such that like issues are treated alike.¹⁴ This would then allow room for potential solutions to emerge. Any potential solutions still have to be highly context specific for their particular societies and studied carefully for their potential relevance across societies. That could be the kind of world that Zakaria would want to inhabit. The primary focus of the book is on the causes of concern to white feminism, but radicalization of society is an issue that affects everyone such that women must be a part of trying to evolve solutions across and within societies for similar problems.

Overall, Zakaria's intervention is not calling for a mere recognition of identity within broader structures that remain unchanged—this is the heart of the challenge that she is raising.¹⁵ She is also honest enough to make clear that this is something that she has personally and professionally grappled with, whether for instance to take a position within an organization at a particular time.¹⁶ The dilemma is whether the ultimate goal is to dismantle inherently unjust structures such that striking down is necessary before a restructuring can happen in the ways that are needed, or whether change can incrementally come from within. She seems to have arrived in life towards a position that leans more heavily towards the conclusion that change from within structures with inherent problems is essentially a non-starter.¹⁷ Despite good intentions, working within structures cannot accomplish change as quickly as present-day challenges demand. Therefore, it seems like change must come from outside—not only from wholesale criticism and critique, but also from efforts that build on and build out a vision as it should be. Those are the kinds of challenges that people dissatisfied with current structures face. It is no mean task to build functions to do all the minutiae of specific everyday tasks that are required to maintain institutions that are inherently nonracist, for instance, or institutions that are truly intersectional in their approach. This is something

13. ZAKARIA, *supra* note 1, at 166.

14. *Id.* 198-200.

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.* at 197.

17. *Id.* at 194.

that today's reformers, and especially feminist reformers from excluded minorities, are faced with. Unfortunately, for the task at hand, there do not yet seem to be examples in a sustained way at scale that Zakaria can point to that could be models of how to set up these envisaged structures. It is not at all a requirement that a critique such as this book must showcase examples of successfully reconstituted and reconceptualized institutions. Zakaria as a theorist and as a practitioner is well within her rights to both point out shortcomings and then exhort mainstream feminism as well. No doubt, she does this to inspire countless dissatisfied and excluded others to do the hard work of institution-building that the challenges we face require.

In these necessarily brief reflections of Zakaria's book, it is particularly important to pause and pay some deeper attention to some of the book's arguments in a way that does not take away from the importance of her other arguments and overall interconnected claims. In the book's third chapter, Zakaria fundamentally takes on the ideas that she is concerned with in a way that overlays and overlaps with the idea of "development," that is, in myriad ways, so much of the work that feminists are engaged with.¹⁸ She highlights that the idea of empowerment was originally conceived by an Indian feminist, Gita Sen, and her colleagues and researchers in the 1980s.¹⁹ In time, the idea of empowerment was taken over and incorporated bereft from its political underpinnings as something that development organizations and non-governmental organizations commit to. As Zakaria makes clear, when the idea of empowerment is contextualized and historicized it is clearly about political power and not just something that can be bestowed upon a recognized group through a comprehensively technocratic and modern policy-oriented framework.²⁰ This is a very powerful intervention. One of the ironies of what she is pointing out is that even when nonwhite feminists produce a fundamental challenge to the existing order, the discourse can still be incorporated into global development frameworks and paradigms in a way that silences these activists and the fundamental change for which they are working. It is a system that puts people in their prescribed boxes and offers them recognition in a formal way, but because the recognition is a grant rather than something obtained more organically, the result of whether actual empowerment and goals are achieved remains questionable.

This is a particularly deep insight of Zakaria's work where she is linking feminism and the global development agenda as popularly conceived. Development frameworks and the networks of recognized

18. *Id.* at 58.

19. *Id.* at 57-58.

20. *Id.* at 65.

experts who operate them are financed in ways that define the very work that occurs in other less developed places and countries.²¹ Her challenge thus is feminism as currently constituted. She links the ways in which feminism is organized and has come to be through a tracing of its historical antecedents and under-acknowledged social and cultural contexts to the kinds of societies that are likely to emerge, within the center and the periphery, from within this conception. As she points out, something conceived so narrowly and without an appreciation of its proper contextual underpinnings can only hope to achieve narrow, limited gains. This poverty of imagination is a particular tragedy and, while it may well be an unintended tragedy as Zakaria points out, this outcome is something that global feminists and white feminists should take very seriously. It is undoubtedly the case that this is an actual disempowerment rather than the empowerment that white feminists had set out to achieve through their work.²² But the sad contradiction of the gap between their intended actions and actual outcomes, as Zakaria points out, is nevertheless happening and it is absolutely necessary to acknowledge the reality of the outcome to be able to address the shortcomings of the current approach. Of course, as we know, it is very hard to look oneself in the mirror. And let's make no mistake, Zakaria is holding up a mirror to white feminists. And the question is whether they are bold enough to be able to look at themselves and the contradictions inherent in their work—the true images as Zakaria is showing them and asking them to see. Can that recognition and that image once seen lead to real change rather than cause white feminists to look away from perhaps an uncomfortable image?

Naturally, most of us prefer not to acknowledge our shortcomings. It requires a lot of strength to see ourselves for who we are and the histories from which we emerge, the paths we take, and our own individual journeys. It is especially difficult to see the realities of structures as they really are. This challenge is simply because of the embeddedness of existing commitments of norms and to how things are regularly done. But Zakaria is laying down that challenge. And it does behoove us to look at where the movement of feminism as currently broadly conceived—“white feminism,” as she describes it—has come from and where it needs to head to. Without a real look, change will be impossible.

Zakaria also points out a very important corollary, perhaps again unintended as many consequences may well be, that feminists in developing countries are more likely to be branded as pro-Western agents

21. *Id.* at 62.

22. *Id.* at 66.

in their jurisdictions because of their very alignment with white feminists.²³ This is particularly so as funding for the causes they work on may come from international donor organizations and richer, friendly, foreign partner countries.²⁴ It is thus easier for opponents of these activists to accuse them of wanting to bring Westernized ideas to those societies. This is a real problem because being branded a Western agent makes these activists' work that much harder—a double whammy that they must contend with. So, we have here again, as so much of what Zakaria focuses on, a problem that we can understand as being two sides of the same coin. The issue in this case is whether being aligned with feminism broadly is in fact helpful to feminists within majority nonwhite countries because doing so labels them as Westernized and colonized in terms of the ideas that they wish to bring to their societies.²⁵ At the same time, her insight also highlights that even if Western feminists want to help their sisters in other places, nevertheless their well-intentioned efforts may be doing more harm than good.²⁶ This again needs to be honestly evaluated. And if white feminism would be more honest in its real impact and be more critical of its own antecedents, that honesty may actually help non-Western and nonwhite feminists working to fight their own societies' harms.

Going forward it is very important for us to think about how Zakaria's ideas can become more widely dispersed and considered in the study and literature of feminism. What I have in mind specifically is how the work enters the very curricula that she described as having learned from and the shortcomings of that literature and the questions and concerns that it conceived. Zakaria's perspective is particularly important and perhaps our discussion here through this special issue and conference will attract a wider interest in her ideas within the domains of white feminism and higher education in the West, which is where her intervention is targeted. We must envisage a path by which her ideas achieve a broader purchase and are read more widely. Will higher education educators of the future be honest enough and bold enough to engage with her ideas and introduce them to their students? It is certainly hoped that that will be the case, but it is by no means guaranteed. There is after all an established discourse, and an established discourse is difficult to shift. Zakaria's bold and honest intervention attempts to do just that. The other strand of her ideas finds purchase within the so-called developing world. It is not yet clear whether feminists in non-Western, nonwhite majority jurisdictions will take up these

23. *Id.* at 82-83.

24. *Id.* at 90.

25. *Id.* at 88-89.

26. *Id.* at 91.

ideas, engage with them, and use them in their curricula and discourse. The work that is required is on many interconnected aspects. White feminists need to incorporate and study Zakaria's ideas as coming from someone who is attempting to hold up a mirror to them and their antecedents and issuing a challenge to them to do better in the future. At the same time, a question remains of whether there is a danger that with her focus on white feminism as the dominant form of feminism, her project is too far removed from the struggles that nonwhite women are waging in their societies. Another aspect of the question is whether nonwhite women feminists will find it useful to study these ideas in ways that will help them shape what they are doing. Zakaria, as she has informed us, is an immigrant to America, is naturalized, and is thereby a long-standing citizen. Could it perhaps be that her concerns are now too far removed to be of much immediately-felt use to societies in which nonwhite women are the majority? In the spirit of true intellectual and practical inquiry as well as in the quest for more just outcomes, I hope sincerely that all feminists everywhere will rise to the challenge and take Zakaria's ideas seriously such that they can help create a different order—one that is fairer, more just and equitable, and that has the heart to acknowledge its own shortcomings. Hopefully feminists everywhere will be inspired to be an actor for positive good in the world.