

WHITE FEMINISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Rafia Zakaria's blistering and brilliant *Against White Feminism* is so successful on its own terms that it leaves little to add—especially for a white male who lacks the standing to do so.¹ But, since the book challenges ongoing attempts to rethink international history so provocatively, whether inadvertently or intentionally, it cannot hurt to share a few notes about how. The book is not trying to be a history, of course. It combines the personal and the political to extraordinary effect, while drawing on scholarship for the sake of public ends. Yet, among the other things she does in the book, Zakaria provides some hypotheses that place white feminism in historical perspective. She deserves far more than an answer from movements and thinkers; *Against White Feminism* also demands a rethinking of where the appalling complex came from and how it took on its current form, for the sake of imagining a different feminist solidarity beyond it.

The most obvious historical thesis in Zakaria's book is that white feminism is still tethered to colonial origins. White supremacy goes back a long way, but Zakaria is right to intuit that it has to be connected to the imperial meridian of world history, roughly between 1850 and 1950, when a "global color line" was established just at the time feminism rose in prominence across the Atlantic with internationalist aims.² Already, in her second chapter, Zakaria dwells on the example of Englishwoman Gertrude Bell to show that "the habit of centering the white woman when talking about the emancipation of women of color has a genealogy."³ Zakaria draws on scholars of imperial history, such as Antoinette Burton and,

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1. RAFIA ZAKARIA, *AGAINST WHITE FEMINISM: NOTES ON DISRUPTION* (2021).
2. MARILYN LAKE & HENRY REYNOLDS, *DRAWING THE GLOBAL COLOUR LINE: WHITE MEN'S COUNTRIES AND THE INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGE OF RACIAL EQUALITY 2* (Catherine Hall et al. eds., 2008).
3. ZAKARIA, *supra* note 1, at 18.

further on, Durba Mitra, to document the importance of the colonial origins of white feminism, not least when it comes to moral regulation of sex and the selective obsession with instilling virtue among brown women.⁴ In another chapter, Zakaria alludes to colonial precedents for concern for “atavistic” practices, like genital mutilation, honor killings, and widow burning. Zakaria persuasively argues that this exemption of white male violence from scrutiny in the domestic politics of imperial states burnishes the moral credentials of Western civilization to be imposed around the world.⁵

Just now, there is an explosion of scholarly interest in “women’s internationalism.”⁶ And given the exclusion of white feminism itself from most international history written of, by, and for men, some essential rectification is taking place. Zakaria suggests, however, that it would be a mistake to sever this current attempt to emphasize women in the past of international relations without revealing the deep intersection with global racialization. The movements in which early feminist internationalism was prominent around the turn of the twentieth century—the height of empire—are cases in point for Zakaria’s perspective.

For example, the campaign to institutionalize some kind of interstate peace (frequently articulated explicitly in racial terms as a “white peace”) or to suppress trafficking in East European women (openly figured as “white slavery”) were obviously racialized to their core.⁷ They were white women’s movements on behalf of those in the white world—with few precious exceptions. Such feminism wasn’t just a matter of hierarchical double standards; it provided a powerful rationalization for geopolitical dominion. As Zakaria puts it, claims of “moral supremacy” were useful “in order to justify colonial expansion and control.”⁸

The essential historical premise of *Against White Feminism*, then, is both powerful and true. As Zakaria concludes, even today, feminist politics needs to be uprooted from its sources in empire, and the racializing soil in which it grew. Otherwise, feminists risk repeating age-old stratagems of

4. See *id.* at 32-55, 104-39 (the latter discussing DURBA MITRA, *INDIAN SEX LIFE: SEXUALITY AND THE COLONIAL ORIGINS OF MODERN SOCIAL THOUGHT* (2019)).

5. *Id.* at 140-67.

6. See, e.g., *WOMEN’S INTERNATIONAL THOUGHT: A NEW HISTORY* (Patricia Owens & Katharina Rietzler eds., 2022).

7. See, e.g., DUNCAN BELL, *DREAMWORLDS OF RACE: EMPIRE AND THE UTOPIAN DESTINY OF ANGLO-AMERICA* (2020); JEANNE MOREFIELD, *THE POLITICAL WORLDS OF SEX TRAFFICKING: FROM THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS TO QANON* (forthcoming).

8. ZAKARIA, *supra* note 1, at 146.

uplift that are also about “celebrat[ing] white women as having gone further in their battle for equality than feminists of color have.”⁹

Important as is this clue that Zakaria gives to understanding the genealogy of white feminism, what also interests me is what happened in between then and now, on the book’s implicit historical narrative. To put things in the strongest possible terms, the era of decolonization after empire is absent from Zakaria’s book—even though her own project is partly a continuation of some of the impulses born in that era between imperial past and our present. However, let’s come back to this fact.

After starting with the long term of empire, Zakaria shifts her historical lenses to the short term of the last few decades, without stopping the medium term of what transpired in between. Our era is one, she persuasively surmises, characterized American hegemony, especially its military interventionism since 1989. And she also stresses that white feminism of this age accompanied neoliberal economics. Starting in the age of empire, white feminism came into its own in the epoch of American and neoliberal rule. Both are points of supreme importance, as they reveal the historical settings in a postcolonial world of American militarism and neoliberal “globalization,” in which white feminism took on many of the forms that Zakaria so powerfully criticizes.

Some of the best chapters in *Against White Feminism* are about the entanglement of white feminism with American militarism. Zakaria has a hard-hitting section on American white feminism at the 1893 World’s Fair—scant years before America’s most demonstrative overseas imperial venture in the Spanish-American war and its aftermath.¹⁰ But then there was a time lapse before the war on terror, as Zakaria arrestingly writes, became America’s “first ‘feminist’ war.”¹¹ Citing anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, Zakaria suggests persuasively that white feminism has turned a blind eye to warmongering or even cheered it on—and I would add that this itself shows that such flawed traditions can become even more compromised, since white feminism in the last century has undergone a general drift from pacifist to militarist.¹²

What happened to America, the European imperial powers, and white feminism? Given her emphasis on a (British) colonial genealogy, Zakaria’s depiction of the contemporary militarization of feminism presupposes the

9. *Id.* at 166.

10. *Id.* at 36-41.

11. *Id.* at 81.

12. *Id.* at 84-86; see generally SAMUEL MOYN, *HUMANE: HOW THE UNITED STATES ABANDONED PEACE AND REINVENTED WAR* (2021) (discussing feminist origins and participation in antiwar movements).

rise of American hegemony. It also requires some story about its reassertion and even intensification in the unipolar moment after 1989, which set the stage for the aspects of the war on terror she persuasively decries.¹³ And Zakaria also has some briefer, if not more excellent, things to say about neoliberalism with which white feminism evolved in tandem, especially after the end of the Cold War.¹⁴ As with militarism, one might also wonder: how did white feminism get entangled with it?

It is here I want to query how to restore the era of decolonization to the making and unmaking of white feminism. Historians will work for years on detailing and specifying the makings of a militarist and neoliberal syndrome whose limits Zakaria so powerfully identifies in her book. What is sketchier in her book, but perhaps even more important to retrieve, are the decolonizing and socialist traditions of global feminism that came before their militarist and neoliberal ones—and which might influence what succeeds them. The only time these traditions appear in *Against White Feminism* is in Zakaria's epic denunciation of Kate Millett, the "lesbian Socialist feminist who believed in a robust internationalism," but who, Zakaria persuasively shows, could not overcome the limitations of white feminism in her memoir of her trip to Iran in 1979.¹⁵

As with her ambivalent and somewhat regretful takedown of feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir, Zakaria has the goods on Millett. She shows that Millett's "radical" stance when it came to Iran was disrespectful, hierarchical, and patronizing—more in keeping with white feminism than a challenge to it. Yet to understand what to take from Millett's career—especially given Zakaria's own critiques of American militarism and economic neoliberalism—a fuller account of what happened to feminism across the twentieth century is critical. For one thing, it is crucial to know where socialist feminism fits in general. It has not been altogether absent from even recent arguments for transcending "lean in" feminism of the neoliberal era.¹⁶ And far more important, it is pivotal to come to grips with an era in which white feminism was most significantly challenged by the attempt to institutionalize a global women's movement in the era of decolonization.

As Zakaria emphasizes throughout her book, there have long been women around the world—even if Gertrude Bell could not see them—who

13. KAREN ENGLE, *THE GRIP OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT: FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS IN INTERNATIONAL LAW* 50-79 (2020).

14. *See* Zakaria, *supra* note 1, at 64-65.

15. *Id.* at 48-49, 51.

16. *See also* NANCY FRASER, *FORTUNES OF FEMINISM: FROM STATE-MANAGED CAPITALISM TO NEOLIBERAL CRISIS* (2013).

advocated for lifting patriarchal oppression. But both organizationally and institutionally, the liberation from empire meant that international feminism transformed in the 1960s and 1970s. Like the rest of world order, it was really at this point that feminism itself was most fundamentally challenged.

In the memory of most in the global north, the true breakthrough of an authentically global feminism came in the neoliberal 1990s, notably at the Beijing United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995 (best known to Americans because Hillary Clinton proclaimed there that “women’s rights are human rights”). But the earlier period was much more transformative, for challenging the militarism and neoliberalism, which sat well with so many in the 1990s (including Clinton), but also whether white women should continue to lead global feminism in the first place. Indeed, from this perspective, Zakaria is setting up the question of how a militarist and neoliberal white feminism *foreclosed* alternatives and *overthrew* movements that had arisen in between the colonial past and our present.

If this interregnum era is shadowy in Zakaria’s account, it is because the same is true in history and memory. But there are a few observations to make about it. With decolonizing and socialist feminism in the ascendancy, the focus of international advocacy was on gaining political and economic power for women. Consider, most prominently, the priorities of the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. And coming in the aftermath of a storied women’s conference in Mexico City, the treaty—even more boldly—connected these priorities for women to the most general transformation of world politics. For example, the treaty calls in its preamble for a “new international economic order”—an allusion to postcolonial demands—while also indicting aggression and occupation that great powers regularly visited on other states.¹⁷

By contrast, for a range of compelling and disturbing reasons, in the 1990s the terms of feminist convergence between the global north and south concerned violence against women, a mobilizational cause which turned out to fit much better with the priorities of the feminism that Zakaria critiques in her book. This was not accidental. As feminist international law scholar Karen Engle has recently argued, “we cannot fully understand the 1990s without awareness of how the women’s human rights movement

17. G.A. Res. 180, U.N. GAOR, 34th Sess., Supp. No. 46, at 193, U.N. Doc. A/34/46 (1979) (entered into force Sept. 3, 1981); *see also* JOCELYN OLCOTT, INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S YEAR: THE GREATEST CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING EVENT IN HISTORY (2021) (chronicling disputes between the agendas of first-world women such as Betty Friedan and feminists and global south); CELIA DONERT, WHOSE UTOPIA?: GENDER, IDEOLOGY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE 1975 WORLD CONGRESS OF WOMEN IN EAST BERLIN, *in* THE BREAKTHROUGH: HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE 1970S 68-79 (Jan Eckel & Samuel Moyn eds., 2014).

began to displace other important feminist approaches during that time.”¹⁸ Countering great power militarism and arguing for economic fairness on a global scale ranked high on the list of such approaches.

This is hardly to say there is some past feminism that has already been deracialized in the past to surgically extract and transplant to the present—any more than it is true of visions of world order generally. Everything remains compromised by the legacies of empire and race, including the beliefs of advocates and priorities of movements. At the same time, the profound racialization not just of oppression but even of reform schemes, past and present, that aim to lift it cannot mean that there is nothing to recapture in between the colonialism of one age and the militarism and neoliberalism of another.

So, in the end, I am left by Zakaria’s masterful indictment wondering whether, precisely because it is so powerful, the lost age between the colonial era and the present day might help recover some of the new starting points the book demands. Needless to say, they will not help unless they are reconfigured for a very different situation today. It is in recognition of this truth that Zakaria has done her most important work, and her book, in effect all by itself, is a new starting point for imagining the very different future for which she so memorably calls.

18. Karen Engle, *Looking Back to Think Forward: What We Might Learn from Cold War Feminist Movements*, 116 AJIL UNBOUND 264 (2021).