

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> Zakaria draws on scholars of imperial history, such as Antoinette Burton and,

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

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

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advocated for lifting patriarchal oppression. But both organizationally and institutionally, the liberation from e

began to displace other important feminist approaches during that time.”<sup>18</sup> 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.