

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

Erum Sattar*

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

* Erum Sattar LLB, LLM, SJD, Lincoln’s Inn, is a Lecturer at Tufts University. She is an Adjunct Professor at the Elizabeth Haub School of Law, Pace University and has taught at Northeastern University School of Law, and the National University of Singapore School of Law. She can be reached at erum.sattar@tufts.edu.

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

2023]

RESPONSE TO

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

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

experts who operate them are financed in ways that define the very work that occurs

in their jurisdictions because of their very alignment with white feminists.²³
This is particularly so as funding for th(r)-4 (o a)9.2 -fk.56 137 (.)TJEMC .

ideas, engage with them, and use them in their curricula and discourse. The work that is required is on many interconnected aspects. White feminists