

# UC San Diego

## MELA Notes

### Title

Ahsan-Tirmizi: Pious Peripheries: Runaway women in post-Taliban Afghanistan

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/56k6551q>

### Journal

MELA Notes, 96(1)

### ISSN

0364-2410

### Author

Khosrowpour, Shahrzad

### Publication Date

2024-09-13

### DOI

10.5070/M7.35414

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

setting, primarily academic libraries, and could help understanding the dynamics of social and political change in the Middle East.

SHAHRZAD KHOSROWPOUR

CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

*Pious peripheries: Runaway women in post-Taliban Afghanistan.* By Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. Pp. xiii, 239. \$26.00 (paperback) ISBN: 9781503614710.

Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi is a lecturer in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University. In this work, the author discusses sexual promiscuity in Afghanistan, focusing on the post-Taliban era.

This book was written based on 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork that Ahsan-Tirmizi carried out in a women's shelter in Kabul and is comprised of her conversations and interviews, and observations taken when accompanying those shelter women at the court while they were trying to negotiate with their families.

Ahsan-Tirmizi explains that women's shelters across the world are considered as a place of refuge against any type of violation. These shelters in Afghanistan are called *khana-yi aman*, which literally means "home of safety" for women as runaways who are sanctioned socially or legally by the state. The runaway women could be daughters, sisters, or wives of families, including members of the Taliban. Runaways are escaping abuse or violation because they seek a divorce or a marriage of which their families do not approve. So in pursuing ways to get their rights, they are tagged as promiscuous. In her fieldwork, Ahsan-Tirmizi explored these women's resistance through mechanisms such as Islamic practices (praying, fasting), or singing poetry or songs to show their ownership of Afghan society as Pashtunwali women. In this way, they create a defense system within their supported community, that is, the shelter (*khana-yi aman*).

Through various examples, the author shows that in the Taliban and post-Taliban state, it is simply impossible to fight against injustice and violence in Afghanistan's courts when it comes to women's rights, be the fight against a mandated marriage or getting a divorce or claiming an inherited property.

Honor and piety are considered norms and accepted by the community, but per the author's fieldwork in shelters, runaway women are creating a different world on the other side of this norm where there is no state or institutional validation. Taliban may envision themselves as the arbiters of piety in Afghanistan and the ones who codified it through legal justifications; however, the author makes a case that the "Taliban did not introduce piety to Afghanistan nor were they the first ones to make it compulsory in Afghan society." (p. 202). The way they governed Afghanistan and created some mandated piety resulted in an atmosphere where runaway women who had been labeled could coexist and live together. Khana-yi aman (shelters) resemble hujra (guesthouses). As the author states, hujra is a place/room that one can find in most Pashtun houses. It means a place where all guests, regardless of their beliefs or creeds, are welcome. Similarly, for runaway women who are in one way or other oppressed by their families, husbands, fathers, or communities, the shelters have become a place to connect to each other with a strong bond regardless of where their individual stories end.

The examples and interviews the author compiled through fieldwork and from true stories of her friends or relatives present the reasons that make the women run away despite the risk of death or mislabeling, or despite the fear they feel about their tough decisions. The fear, Ahsan-Tirmizi concludes, does not stop the runaway women from inhabiting discourses of Islamic piety and living in a different world but with moral selves to confront the barriers and injustice of their lives.

This book mainly concentrates on the difficult lives of runaway women in Afghanistan, and it documents what they experience from their community and the public as social injustice. It is an excellent scholarly work that includes strong references. It could fit in any library setting, primarily academic libraries with collections on women studies, Middle East studies, social and political studies, and humanities. It is also an appropriate source for any academic or literary reading focusing on women and their representations in the communities and countries to which they belong.

SHAHRZAD KHOSROWPOUR

CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY