Book Review


Peshkova’s aim in this book is to understand the ways in which people pursue ‘their life projects intentionally and purposefully’ (p. 269). The author focuses on three otninchalar, female Uzbek religious teachers, and demonstrates that individual moral change, through self-formation, can ultimately lead to wider social change. The central theoretical argument here is that the role of religion in social change, ‘should start with an individual who creates social relations through what I call “relational existential power” and who is not constituted by these relations but informed by them’ (p. 12). The book also raises a number of theoretical sub-questions that emerge from the book’s subtitle ‘public life in private spaces’. The first presents the question of the public life of the researcher and the multiple spaces that the author encounters that create the ‘field’ of research. The second focuses on the experiences of the otninchalar and how they are placed to challenge the public/private divide that sees politics confined only to male-dominated public spaces.

Otninchalar are female equivalents to male imams (clerics) with their home study groups the parallel of male-directed mosque activities. Peshkova points out that otninchalar make important contributions to state formation though in a private, informal and localised way. They use the Qur’an, hadiths, hymns, didactic storytelling and their own spiritually informed histories to create a ‘personal Islam’ that is also extended into a ‘public’ manifestation of imon (faith) in practice. This illustrates the influence of the private sphere on the public.

The author uses a creative non-fiction style to present the narratives of Uzbek women. The argument is constructed through a series of seven propositions that open each chapter and are supported by ethnographic observations, socio-historical analyses, life histories and also personal narratives—building up to the author’s own detention and subsequent deportation from Uzbekistan. Placing the reader at a personal level does create a challenge of representation. Peshkova is able to meet this challenge through employing pseudonyms but also by ‘creating composite characters, places, and stories’ and ‘writing parts of the book as creative non-fiction’ (p. 17).

The introduction and Chapter 1 summarise Peshkova’s theoretical influences which include Nigel Rapport, Saba Mahmoud and Gabriele Marranci, and sets the ethnographic scene. Chapters 2 to 4 analyse the intricacies and the relations between society and self, the role of gendered ‘liberatory’ and ‘non-liberatory’ discourses in restricting women’s agency and identities, and the emotional, pedagogical and strategic value of didactic storytelling. The last two chapters evaluate the restrictive influence of the state’s ideological constructs of Islam on the activities of otninchalar, and reflect on the otninchalar’s positioning in regards to culture, politics and power. The final chapter ‘Not a Conclusion’ follows the author’s ordeal in custody and her escape from Uzbekistan. Here the author appeals
for an analytical turn away from the idea of the state as a fixed and unchanging entity in support of an evaluation that starts with, ‘individuals who achieve it [the state] on a daily basis by appreciating, (re)articulating, and upholding its symbology and ideology’ (p. 298).

Furthermore, the book demonstrates the necessity for scholars to think about the ways that we store and transmit data and the ways that we communicate with research participants. Although Peshkova was shadowed during her fieldwork and though her case is unusual her missteps highlight the importance of password-secured files, self-destructing storage devices like encrypted flash drives, utilising VPN connections and communicating with participants in person rather than via insecure connections. Peshkova’s accounts of her time in the field also imply that researchers need to think carefully about what data they actually collect and the need to collect it. These accounts also inspire us to consider innovative ways to disguise the identity of participants.

This book will be of interest not only to scholars of Islam and Central Asia, but also for undergraduate students of anthropology, sociology and gender studies.

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