

In her dissertation Zoya Wasif studies the relations of Pakistani people to supernatural experiences. Using grounded theory, Zoya conducted a number of interviews with people who have either experienced or have heard of encounters with supernatural phenomena. Furthermore, the research employs a postcolonial perspective, whereby it does not seek to discredit these accounts and to find the “real” causes behind them, but rather to understand the respondents’ views on the topic. Zoya is clearly fascinated by the topic she chose to study, as is evident both from her empathy towards her respondents, as well as from her attention to the details in their stories. This attention is felt most in the analytical section, which compares the different narratives, seeking to find resemblances between them and underlying patterns. Some of the more interesting observations include the cataloguing of apparitions on page 75 (recurring doppelgangers and figures with distorted proportions); the correlation between nonconformist marriages and curses; and the cathartic reasoning behind “cursed” people’s confessions. These topics and others could be studied further, either in Pakistan, or from a comparative perspective in time and space.

Nonetheless, the study suffers from unstable academic foundations. Besides the fact that the bibliography is rather limited, even if the topic of supernatural experiences in Pakistan is not at the center of academic research, the main problem is that the categories formulated for the narratives are not persuasive. Zoya herself admits that the categorization is mostly done for convenience (p. 43), which is not very convincing from a scientific point of view. Alternative categories easily spring to mind, either based on topics (relationships, family), age of experience, or effect (health, economic, uncanniness, etc.). An academic study should convince the readers that the assembly and analysis of the data is not only systematic, but also based on a theory and hypothesis. This “academicism” would not express western disrespect to the respondents’ stories, but might help to illuminate the similarities and differences between them. In addition, the proclaimed use of grounded theory, is not evident in the practical part. Finally, relying on stronger theoretical foundations, could further improve the analysis of the stories, recurring motifs, and their significance.

In spite of these academic drawbacks, the thesis itself is original and uncommon in the field. Further, and perhaps future, elaboration of the study would benefit the research area and the writer.

Grade: 3

Defense questions:

1. With relation to your respondents' stories, can you think about differences between firsthand and secondhand accounts, with regards to motivation and interpretation?
2. You discuss the helplessness of "cursed" individuals, comparing it with the institutionalized treatment of witchcraft among the Azande people. This touches on wider questions of truth and pragmatism – should witchcraft be recognized to alleviate the pain of those who believe in it? Or should we advance other solutions that perhaps circumvent the question of the reality of the cause of pain, but deal with the outcome itself?