

Zoya Wassif: To the Witches and Ghosts Among Us; Exploring how Supernatural Entities uncover Social Processes in Urban Pakistan

Thesis assessment

The text under review is the second, revised version of Zoya Wassif's master's thesis, in which she decided to work on a topic that is not very common in historical sociology, but undoubtedly has its relevance in the field. The author has drawn on findings from her research in Pakistan, and she deals with what can be broadly described as "encounters with the supernatural", often associated in professional vocabulary with the term "liminality" (liminal situations, liminal phenomena). The work has a theoretical-empirical character; on a more general level it can be understood as a contribution to the historical sociology of knowledge. The theoretical part explains the traditions this type of research follows and its significance for social science knowledge. The research part presents the methodology applied to the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge about the phenomena in question

The second version of Zoya Wassif's thesis is significantly modified from the previous one. After criticism during the earlier defence, the author has attempted to give the text a more thorough theoretical framing, more in line with the orientation typical of historical sociology. She has deepened the discussion of the methodological aspects, restructured the content of the chapters in which she deals with the topics under study, and reformulated her concluding chapter. Among the issues she addresses are (a) the topic of curses, (b) churails (witchcraft), and (c) encounters with supernatural entities. Overall, it can be concluded that the second version of Zoya Wassif's thesis is distinctly better developed than the previous version, but nevertheless some objections, comments and suggestions for discussion can be raised.

Among the somewhat problematic aspects of the thesis is the author's tendency to draw from her findings – obtained from a relatively limited sample of

respondents through qualitative methodology –general conclusions about the way of thinking of the Pakistani population, without considering that different parts of this population may have various attitudes and approaches to the issues under study.

The second comment concerns what might be termed a double hermeneutic. The researcher who investigates topics such as those in this work discovers that they are viewed through a dual perspective. The first is the perspective from which the researched actors themselves approach these topics (often referred to in anthropology as 'emic'); the second is the scientific perspective ('etic') from which social scientists approach the issues. In my opinion, the author in this case has failed to properly recognize the difference between these two; the "emic" perspective is adopted as her own and the "etic" perspective is almost entirely abandoned.

Despite these reservations, I recommend Zoya Wassif's thesis for defence. Depending on the course of the defense, it should – in my opinion – be rated either "very good" (2) or "good" (3).

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