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## Book Review: Rafia Zakaria's *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption* W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY: 2021

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Book Review: Rafia Zakaria's *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption*  
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Michelle Colpean, University of Cincinnati

Rafia Zakaria's *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption* weaves between personal narrative, academic theory, and an internationalized set of case studies to draw connections between manifestations of white feminism throughout history and contemporary public culture. It mirrors Zakaria's own life trajectory traversing spheres of law, journalism, feminism, non-profit leadership, and academia as a woman of color immigrant, mother, professional, and scholar. Zakaria's most prominent thesis is that the individualist privilege of white feminism, as a hegemonic ideology rather than an identity category, threatens to undermine the progressive potential of the feminist movement, and write out the histories and realities of non-white, non-upper-middle-class women. She argues that the change that we as feminists need is "transformational change," which hinges on a collective and politicized power, rather than an individualized and privileged stand in for meaningful solidarity.

*Against White Feminism* unfolds across eight short content chapters, which make Zakaria's multifaceted arguments easy to digest and feel particular teachable for feminist classrooms. Chapter One focuses on the origins of the intersection between the white savior complex and feminism in the twenty-first century, and how those legacies continue to cloud the vision of intersectional feminist futures. Chapter Two questions the legitimacy of feminist solidarity itself through a troubled history of white feminist "advocacy" and interest on behalf of non-white women, especially those from the Global South. Zakaria's third chapter continues this discussion through examining how the "white savior industrial complex" traps vocal opponents to this white feminist activism by framing them through the trope of the "ungrateful Brown feminist." Chapter Four shows the life-or-death stakes of global gender rights advocacy as it has been used as a justification for war, connected to a broader trend wherein the white feminist priority becomes "not feminist solidarity but gender parity with white men in professional advancement," (102). The fifth chapter articulates how particular iterations of sex-positive feminism are mobilized as a limiting Eurocentric framework that reinforces the ties between popular feminism, choice, sexuality, and capitalism. Chapter Six indicts the Western feminist fascination with acts such as genital cutting and honor killing and their framing as endemic to "foreign" cultures, and the colonial logics that allow these acts to cast the native as morally inferior while ignoring egregious acts of culturally embedded gendered violence in the West. Zakaria's seventh chapter draws from Black feminist theory to highlight the importance of intersectionality over the reification of privileged white women's voices and issues, in politics, activist, and academic spaces. The final content chapter, "From Deconstruction to Reconstruction," foregrounds reports of racism within the National Organization of Women, the Feminist Majority Foundation, and the American Association of University Women to showcase histories of tokenistic or shallow inclusion within them, while pushing instead for more transformational change. While fundamentally a project focused on identifying racial, cultural, and class stratification within feminist movements, the book ends on an optimistic note,

highlighting the work of WOC activists and the potential for truly intersectionality feminist solidarity.

Zakaria's book is part of a larger body of academic and popular press texts that address the topic of white feminism, including Ruby Hamad's *White Tears/Brown Scars* (2020), Mikki Kendall's *Hood Feminism* (2020), Wendy K. Z. Anderson's *Rebirthing a Nation* (2021), Koa Beck's *White Feminism* (2021), and Kyla Schuller's *The Trouble with White Women* (2021). As a whole, these texts encourage us through extensive research and personal narrative to interrogate the violences of mainstream feminism and the corresponding repercussions in media, interpersonal interactions, and activist politics. Distinctively, *Against White Feminism* serves as a critique and deconstruction of what must be excised from within feminism, and with keen awareness of its scope and limitations, mostly leaves the project of rebuilding what remains in the hands of other scholars.

*Against White Feminism* may be of particular interest to feminist pedagogues because of her classroom anecdotes. While the rest of Zakaria's book is both highly teachable and full of valuable insights, her reflections on her own classroom experiences serve as a direct wakeup call to educators to avoid some of the missteps that she identifies as particularly alienating. She indicts the "'white savior feminist' professor" as a "central culprit in pushing Western-centered narratives" that alienate non-White, non-Western, non-middle-to-upper-class women inside and outside the walls of their classrooms (177). Zakaria's book reminds us to carefully reflect on the issues we foreground in our classrooms, the framing of these issues, and the voices and perspectives we use to engage them. Thinking from the margins brings us closer to the type of transformation change we need in our everyday interactions, teaching practices, and activist impulses.