

Book Review: *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia* by Shenila Khoja-Moolji

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BOOK REVIEW

***FORGING THE IDEAL EDUCATED GIRL:
THE PRODUCTION OF DESIRABLE SUBJECTS IN MUSLIM SOUTH ASIA***
BY SHENILA KHOJA-MOOLJI
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2018. XI + 202 PAGES
\$34.95 (PAPER)
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In *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia*, Shenila Khoja-Moolji gives us an overview of how debates around gender and education have unfolded over the course of one hundred years. The author takes the readers on an intellectually rigorous but accessible journey across South Asia and from 19th-century colonial India to present-day Pakistan, to show the dynamic, shifting, and contested articulations of the figure of the educated Muslim girl. Khoja-Moolji explains that education, girlhood, and womanhood are not static formulations but outcomes of dynamic and complex social negotiations that necessarily produce diversity in what signifies the educated Muslim girl at different periods and locations, and within different power relations. The figure of the Muslim woman emerges as a fluid subject as opposed to a stable object.

Those who read about education in emergencies will find this book highly useful. Khoja-Moolji dismantles homogenous assumptions about Muslim womanhood and girlhood that are embedded not only in the Western aid-industrial complex and Western foreign and domestic policies but within institutions internal to Muslim societies. Khoja-Moolji succeeds in disrupting the tiresome storyline of the Muslim girl/woman as an example of backward womanhood that is oppressed by religion, tradition, and patriarchy and is, therefore, unable to fulfill her potential in the modern social order unless saved by modern education. The most insightful aspect of the book is that it turns the generalized assumption of the mute, secluded, and subjugated Indian Muslim woman on its head by centering on women's historical narratives that show them to be "fully human and political subjects" (22). Khoja-Moolji reminds readers that the contemporary development regime's portrayal of Muslim women is remarkably similar to those circulated in colonial India in the 18th and 19th centuries, when "Mosalman women" surfaced as figures to be rescued from regressive cultural norms of *pardah*, seclusion, early marriage, and superstitions. Colonial officers and Christian missionaries, as well as Muslim social reformers, claimed that education would save, civilize, or reform these women.

Rich in historical detail, this book will interest a wide-ranging audience: students, academics, policymakers, journalists, women, activists, and practitioners. It also speaks across several disciplines: gender studies, postcolonial feminist studies, South Asian history, education studies, citizenship studies, and religious studies. Deploying Foucauldian genealogical insights, Khoja-Moolji offers a critical analysis of historical records, magazines, government documents, speeches, campaign adverts, novels, commercial advertisements, television programs, and fieldwork.

Forging the Ideal Educated Girl unfolds in six chapters, each offering a different entry point into how the figure of the ideal educated Muslim girl/woman is constructed. The first chapter analyzes the contemporary production in the works of journalist Nicholas Kristof and former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in policy briefs, campaigns, articles, and speeches. Using such examples as Malala Yousafzai and the Nigerian girls kidnapped by Boko Haram, they create a larger-than-life, abstract, ahistorical, and monolithic collective of “the girl in crisis” by erasing particular histories, contexts, and diversity: “If we know one (Malala), we know them all (Nigerian girls). If we design a development intervention for one, we can apply it to all” (3). Chapter two goes back in time to the turn of the 20th century, where we encounter the intense debate raging on the education of the “Mosalman” girl/woman in political speeches, writings, and didactic novels written by male and female Muslim social reformers. We see the figure of the ideal Muslim woman and her education constructed against the backdrop of expanding colonial hegemony, the decline in the wealth and prestige of many north Indian Muslim families, and the prevailing trepidation and adjustments based on class, caste, gender, and access to power. In chapter 3, we are in the early decades of independent Pakistan, where we encounter the making of the ideal citizen-subject on whose shoulders rest gendered responsibilities for nation-building, modernization, and development. Chapter 4 brings us back to the present day, where the image of the ideal girlhood is launched through transnational girls’ education and empowerment campaigns. Chapter 5 interrogates two Pakistani television shows based on Nazir Ahmed’s 1869 novel *Mirat-ul-uroos* (*The Bride’s Mirror*). The final chapter traces the key storylines that overlap across these various periods. On our tour across a century, we are delightfully offered a glimpse of women’s voices, writings, novels, and speeches in which they narrate their educational desires and aspirations and their construction of an ideal educated girlhood. Their archival writings in periodicals and novels from the past and voices from today offer a rich understanding of how women participate in making respectable Muslim women and girls.

Together these chapters give us an overview of how debates around gender and education have unfolded over a hundred years. The figure of the Muslim girl/woman repeatedly encounters the discourse of *sharafat* (respectability), but through time it acquires different registers mitigated by class, religion, and political demands. The ideal Muslim girl/woman is required to do many things: reform civilization, reproduce class, boost GDP, perform modernity, and uphold religious identity. Contemporary policymakers, development workers, and globally powerful patriarchs assume that an ideal modern, educated girl will help solve practically every problem in the Global South, including poverty, terrorism, extremism, and gender-based violence, all while they lead their nations to prosperity, participate in the labor market, and serve global capitalism. Muslim women and girls are simply expected to receive the kind of education that enables them to successfully manage these societal tasks. However, education also serves as a discursive site in which women actively participate in shaping education and religious reform projects despite colonization, Western military interventions, patriarchal pressure, and socioeconomic constraints. Even the contemporary neoliberal tropes of the entrepreneurial “empowered girl” as “successful”/developed girls are contested and adapted locally.

The most significant contribution this book makes is curating, preserving, and giving context to women’s writings about their educational concerns that were written at the turn of the 20th century. Women’s writings have been relegated to the margins in the broader telling of history, nation-building, and development in South Asia, and they have not been preserved well. Moreover, the rich historical account that encapsulates an entire century alone makes this book an essential collection for those interested in gender and South Asia. Finally, and importantly, Khoja-Moolji’s text punctures the tendency of current development agendas to caricature all Muslim women and girls with one broad stroke—that is, as a universally repressed, monolithic, and ahistorical figure.

The limitations of this important work are not many, but they are significant. Khoja-Moolji draws predominantly from elite Muslim men’s and women’s experiences and voices, and she correctly acknowledges that the book is geographically limited to north India in its invocation of the past. Moreover, while the diversity of India’s Muslim populations includes the historically oppressed Adivasi Muslims (indigenous populations), Dalit Muslims (formerly the “untouchables” in the Hindu caste system), and Shudra Muslims (formerly the lowest caste in the Hindu varna system), their voices and feminist education movements remain beyond the author’s gaze. This is a significant lacuna, as their voices remain in the margins even in this broad story of Muslims in South Asia. The book does mention caste, but it misses out on a vital discussion of how centrally caste affected gendered

subjectivities and educational discourse in colonial India (and continues to do so). A glaring absence is that of Fatima Sheikh, a social reformer, educator, and anti-caste activist who, along with Savitribai Phule, in 1848 founded a school for girls irrespective of their caste, class, or religion, which was a revolutionary act at that time. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan did not establish the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (Aligarh Muslim University) until 1875, but Fatima Sheikh has not received the same praise and status for her pioneering work as Ahmed Khan has for his. This may be because women's activism in South Asia is less esteemed than that of men, but also because her radical humanist work went against the sensibilities of *ashraf*, the upper caste Muslims and Hindus who frowned upon mixing with people from the lower castes.

This book should nonetheless help advocates of girls' education, particularly those embedded in the aid-industrial complex, to stop uncritically abstracting girls and their education from "broader concerns related to social class, domestic and foreign politics, and missionary impulses of international development" (157). Khoja-Moolji calls on education reformers to go beyond putting the onus on girls and women to fix the social and political problems caused by global and local patriarchs, and to critically reveal "the underlying conditions of women's subjection—a move away from the service-delivery model and toward a more politicized feminism" (158). Without this level of critical understanding and effort, schooling will continue to reproduce old and new hierarchies and to put added burdens on girls.

I end with Khoja-Moolji's powerful call to action (157):

Move away from interpreting Muslim women's lives in absolute terms—as either always-oppressed or free, always-silent or empowered. Instead, they (the complex stories) point to how different social forces regulate the lives of women as well as how women who suffer, resist, strategize, withdraw, and overcome, are crucial players in such stories.

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