

BOOK REVIEW

FORGING THE IDEAL EDUCATED GIRL: THE PRODUCTION OF DESIRABLE SUBJECTS IN MUSLIM SOUTH ASIA

Khoja-Moolji, S. (2018). *Forging the ideal educated girl: the production of desirable subjects in Muslim South Asia*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

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The current mainstream rhetoric by Global North medias and NGOs uses the ‘educated girl’ of the Global South as an indestructible force that will somehow address all familial, local, national, and global issues at once, such as dismantling the patriarchy, forging economic development, and negating global terrorism. The Muslim girl nuance adds another layer of ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’ that education apparently provides, saving the girl from fundamentalist, backward Islamic traditions that have restricted her potential for too long.

This rhetoric serves as the rationale behind the writing of *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia* by Shenila Khoja-Moolji. The author makes it clear that this global rhetoric is limited and limiting. Khoja-Moolji points out that such simple generalizations of Muslim girls, their contexts, and their education’s ability to overcome all global barriers to success within the confinements of commodified gains misses the mark entirely. Efforts need to be made that go beyond the ‘saving of Muslim girls’ from their religious and patriarchal societies.

To contribute to such efforts, Khoja-Moolji conducts an in-depth qualitative study of historical and contemporary discourses,

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particularly in journals, texts, stories, and visual advertisements in Pakistan about girls' and women's education through three key time periods. Through these texts and discussions, Khoja-Moolji is able to identify multiple tiers of nuance in issues pertaining to access to education, class differences, and imposing perceptions by Western ideologies. The use of the Muslim 'girl' and Muslim 'woman' is also a subject of contention in Khoja-Moolji's book.

Starting with the turn of the 20th century, Khoja-Moolji engages readers in several essays and stories published in journals, periodicals, and books during this time, such as *Mirat-ul-Uroos* (The Bride's Mirror), *Tehzib-e-Niswan* (Women's Cultural Upbringing), and *Akhbar-un-Nisa* (Women's News) that have both male and female readership. With the rise of British colonial rule, Muslim communities were forced to reckon with a changing political, social, and economic landscape, no longer enjoying the privilege that was once accessible to them in the Mughal era. Khoja-Moolji highlights the desire of Muslim communities to earn back that respectability, specifically for *ashraf* (honorable) families who once held high administrative positions. The discussions of education in these texts are centered on building back that *sharafat* (respect) under the realm of Islam. Women of *ashraf* families become a target audience of these publications. The texts highlight the need for girls and women to be educated in household management to become ideal daughters, wives, and mothers in order to garner that respectability. Both women and men are shown to engage in this discourse, oftentimes providing specific guidelines and examples as to how a *sharif* (respectable) girl/woman should behave. Gaining an education to acquire wage work that would foster individuality and autonomy was rarely supported. Both female and male authors deem wage work only a necessity in difficult times. In addition, western education in missionary schools was seen in a negative light for women from *ashraf* families. As claimed in the written discourses during this time, the influence of such liberal, Christian-oriented thinking was perceived as a derogatory form of education.

Khoja-Moolji then takes us to the post-Independence era exclusively in Pakistan, where new nationalistic sentiments and citizenship become essential factors in determining the course of education for women. Women are now seen as important national agents, who have to be educated with the right balance of religion and modernity to produce Pakistan's future generation. It is hoped that this generation, with the influence of their educated mothers, would then go on to cultivate the socioeconomic development of Pakistan. During this era, efforts are taken to let go of the colonial past and educational forms, as

well as dismiss traditional religious sentiments. Emphasis is placed on Islamic teachings that encourage social justice and the formation of a national community.

Lastly, Khoja-Moolji highlights contemporary discussions of girls' education by analyzing a lower middle class minority community's take on the issue. Girls, teachers, and parents from a city in southern Pakistan are interviewed in focus groups to understand the dynamics of contemporary education. Middle-class aspirations of wage work and marriageability are considered to be the main driving point. Working in an office is seen as social strata that will help support their families in the long run, and a means to avoid labor work that is not as respectable. Education is seen as a need, rather than a desire. Upper-middle-class girls are perceived to have the luxury of not having to work after gaining an education, while increasing their marriage prospects. The conversation on religious and mainstream education also comes up where students are still trying to find a balance between the two, not fully able to comprehend which one is more important.

The three eras show some commonalities in the kinds of conversations that have occurred around women's education. Respectability, social class, and religious vs. modern are themes discussed throughout. Though not explicitly stated or addressed by the author, the genealogical approach in writing this book seems to set a tone of incrementalism. The chronological order of eras studied, the gradual shift in rhetoric of discussion around girls' and women's education in Pakistan, and the ongoing conversation about achieving sustainable growth in the Global South, all support the influences of an incremental change in thinking and doing. As a student of planning theory and history, I consider incrementalism a natural approach to change in thinking and policy. Radical changes receive radical resistance, and so Khoja-Moolji's undertone, perhaps unintentional, can be a lesson for people in the field of policy and development. Perhaps global organizations and institutions need to adopt such thinking to allow for growth that is more organic and sustainable rather than enforcing ideals that might never resonate with the community they are trying to 'help'.

Another major commonality is that the driving force of education in each era fosters some sort of socio-economic gain for the larger community, usually imposed by people in some sort of power - a discourse we are still seeing in contemporary educational pursuits. It is incorrect to assume that discussions on who should be educated in what capacity for what benefit by which entity have not been considered before. Such conversations have been going on for centuries, where the educator, the educated, the location, and the beneficial outcome

continuously shift, but the rationale does not. This book, therefore, provides multiple tiers of issues around the discourse of girls' education: The generalization of the Muslim girl vs. the contextual realities of the Muslim girl; the generalization of pedagogical methods vs. the contextual reasoning of pedagogical methods; the generalization of the Muslim girl/woman vs. the difference between the Muslim girl/woman. This discourse resonates with those who have been labeled a woman or girl in need of saving, and is insightful to those who liken themselves as saviors of that girl or woman.

On multiple occasions, Khoja-Moolji refers to Malala Yousafzai's journey as an advocate for girls' education to highlight the kind of representative sought by the Global North. By combining these examples with the specific discourses and contexts in Pakistan mentioned above, Khoja-Moolji challenges the generalized narrative that girls and women are reduced to by such entities. The author emphasizes the need for more authentic representation and narrative building, where a girl or woman is able to overcome her personal challenges on her own, without the need for 'enlightenment' or education from Western organizations. She does not need to be a tool that fights all national threats. She already has local knowledge, achievements, and experiences that make her valuable to society, which Khoja-Moolji notes throughout the book.

The author's reference to South Asia in the book's title can be paradoxical based on what the author is trying to achieve. Accounts of countries like India and Bangladesh have not been analyzed, particularly in the post-Independence era. This can be misleading, as Pakistan's cultural context is quite different to experiences and discourses in other South Asian countries. However, Khoja-Moolji's evaluation of one case study in one country, with only three time periods, focusing mostly on one social class is overwhelming enough in its complexity. Imagine the complexity of all the nations of the Global South that have been reduced to one case study needing saving. Surely, this book can be used as a clue into what institutions should consider before imposing ironically patriarchal ideals. Therefore, I would recommend this book to leaders and organizers in the nonprofit and philanthropy sector, particularly those who have been tasked with running similar campaigns on 'educated girls' in the Global South.

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