

Book Review: Khoja-Moolji, S. (2018). *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia*. University of California Press

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*Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia*

Shenila Khoja-Moolji

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Western policy discourse uses girls' education as a marker of modernity. Countless nongovernmental organizations across the policy sphere, such as the Malala Fund, promote girls' education as a catchall solution for countering extremism and developing the Global South. In *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia*, Shenila Khoja-Moolji problematizes this discourse by locating it within a colonial framework that views women and girls as neither subjects nor objects of reform, but as symbolic proxies for their brown and black communities. While she opens with a discussion of neoliberal and colonial actors, Khoja identifies women's and girls' education as a discursive space where a wide range of actors promoted their social projects throughout 20th century. She builds on scholarship about colonial and Western discourses on Muslim women by focusing on debates internal to Muslim society, tracking how transnational, state, and local forces have intertwined to produce female subjectivities—citizen subjects, gendered subjects, worker subjects, and religious subjects—in British India and present-day Pakistan.

Her book combines techniques from history and sociology to form a genealogy, an investigation of the ways that knowledge-making practices produce and erase subjectivities. This methodology allows her to decenter the subject and place different historical contingencies of Muslim girlhood and womanhood within "broader assemblages" (Khoja-Moolji, 2018, p. 21). In other words, she locates ideal feminine subjectivities within sets of practices that reproduce other

power matrices—namely class, nation, and religion—and demonstrates that women’s education has always been subsumed under patriarchal and capitalist interests.

The early chapters analyze how male Muslim reformers framed ideal subjectivities for women and girls within community-building projects. Chapter two breaks down how women became the bearers of class markers when former *ashraf* classes fought to maintain their high social status during the transition from Mughal to British rule. She argues that social practices such as performances of *sharafat* (respectability) fell to women. Similarly, chapter three elaborates how during Pakistan’s inaugural years, reformers constructed the ideal modern woman as an educated and gendered citizen subject who bore responsibility for upholding the new nation. While Khoja-Moolji acknowledges her book’s limited engagement with Muslim masculinities, chapters two and three present an opportunity for students and academics to further investigate how masculine subject positions coded and reinforced the boundaries of public space. Ultimately, Khoja-Moolji claims that the push for women’s education originated out of this perceived necessity: to utilize women to further these social projects.

The book then moves on to discuss how debates over women’s education were about the type of education appropriate for constructing and maintaining new female subject positions. Chapters one and two set up respectability as a central theme when they lay out how the *ashraf* classes and Pakistani reformers promoted knowledge that would exclusively enable women to best perform their roles as enterprising wife-companions and educators of future subject citizens. While male reformers dominated this discourse, Khoja-Moolji draws in women’s voices to reveal how even women’s advocacy of education was often subsumed under the desire to uphold other social identities. For instance, the author describes how early issues of the Urdu women’s periodicals *Tehzib*, *Ismat*, and *Khatun* constructed a transregional community of middle-class women by publishing articles on topics deemed respectable or of the private sphere. Khoja-Moolji teases out the persistence of respectability in the present day. In chapter five, she breaks down how middle-class perceptions of formal education as linked to waged work and the home as a space for moral instruction reproduce the patrilinear family structure by differentiating between types of knowledge. Her group conversations with Shi’i girls, teachers, and parents in Pakistan, reported in chapter four, further demonstrate how local concerns over respectability (expressed

in terms of safe working conditions, marriageability, and type of education) and religiosity (articulated in terms of maintaining a Shi'a identity) disrupt the state and transnational discourse on education as emancipatory, and constrain girls' ability to engage with a successful schooling system as they balance multiple and complex subject positions.

Underlying her book is the argument that present-day transnational and state actors frame girls as exclusively economic actors, and education as a commodity to improve girls' livelihoods by attracting opportunity. Khoja-Moolji challenges the assumptions of the development-aid-industrial complex by highlighting how Muslim women's and girls' calls for and negotiations of schooling are connected to their subject positions across multiple social spaces. International policymakers and journalists can benefit greatly from this book, as it illuminates how the discourse on girls' education sidelines women's and girls' needs. It also provides policymakers and journalists with the tools to understand and articulate "the underlying conditions of women's subjection" (Khoja-Moolji, 2018, p. 158). Students will additionally benefit from this book, since it will introduce them to different methods for writing interdisciplinary and inclusive histories that highlight women and their voices while placing them within their sociopolitical contexts.

## References

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