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***Book Review Essay: Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones: Transforming, not Transmitting, Trauma*¹**

Diana J. Fox²

Nyla Khan's new book immerses readers in emancipatory pedagogical and self-reflexive processes that have particular value for the university classroom, but which also offer survivors of trauma and cross-generational descendants a hopeful opportunity to unpack their own potential negative adaptations to subverted personal harrowing histories of pain and suffering. Whether these take place in the home—the recommended starting point for surfacing difficult discussions—in group therapy sessions, or academic environments, offering pathways for healing and to empower students to become productive, contributing members of their families, communities, and societies, particularly those who are suffering from intergenerational trauma are the ultimate objectives of this text. In *Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones*, Khan draws from a wealth of multidisciplinary sources that have, in recent decades, contributed to an abundance of research in trauma studies, including psychology, psychiatry, history, sociology, education, and my own disciplines of anthropology, women's and gender studies.

The book is in part a contextualized guide for teachers / professors and counselors as well as policymakers, especially those involved in educational policy. It begins with a Preface that introduces readers to Khan's own native Jammu and Kashmir, an ethnically diverse region in the northernmost part of the Indian subcontinent. This stunningly beautiful Himalayan landscape of approximately 86,000 square miles of snow-capped peaks, is claimed both by Pakistan and India; India controls the southern half of Kashmir, politically organized as the state of Jammu and Kashmir. When India and Pakistan won their independence from Britain in 1947, the Maharaja, Hari Singh, Khan's grandfather chose to join India rather than becoming an independent state, accepting India's help against invading Pakistan. This decision rendered him and subsequently his family, including Nyla Khan, controversial figures. Dedicated to the people of Jammu and Kashmir and her later father, Dr. Mohammed Al Matto, who lost his life through a struggle with cancer, Khan tells of her father's profound influence on her. Throughout her life, he cultivated in her a passion for Kashmiri culture and history as well as compassion for suffering, the twin values of resilience and hope. Khan thus begins her monograph by positioning herself as both a product of her family and culture as well as an individual, driven by love for the land and people. Her discussion offers healing remedies meaningful both to those living through and survivors of conflict in the region and far beyond wherever there is conflict-driven suffering.

Khan's polemic resounds as a clarion cry for educational pedagogy and policy to perceive youth as whole persons whose family histories of war, militancy, discrimination, forced migration, and

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other trauma-inducing experiences shape the lenses through which they view the world. Her approach—drawing abundantly from her own teaching experiences in Kashmir and Oklahoma, her present home—is to demonstrate how young people can make these lenses visible to themselves as a foundation for deep learning, developing the skills of critical self-analysis and societal critique that builds bridges across assumptions of differences that have been fueled primarily by political conflict. This process, she asserts, begins by excavating submerged personal histories of trauma.

The opportunity to immerse myself in Khan's liberatory teaching philosophy has reinforced my own pedagogical process as it undoubtedly will for others, while offering insightful challenges even to those of us who have long been practicing student empowerment strategies. Her writing approach reflects feminist, sociological and anthropological embrace of personal narratives, social historical life histories and legal testimonies. I am not a trauma specialist; as a result, from the discussion I learned an enormous amount about the many approaches to historical and contemporary global conflicts that practitioners have developed to address trauma survivors. However, for the same reason I would have found it especially helpful if Khan had opted to include psychological definitions of trauma and intergenerational trauma in addition to their sources.

As I read, I began to think about the relationship between her pedagogical method of invoking personal narratives/life histories and the thinking that has emerged from second wave feminism in the 1970s and '80s pertaining to the role of subjective reflexivity in societal transformation. Second wave feminists from across feminism's theoretical spectrum have asserted that undoing patriarchy and societal metamorphosis toward gender equality require engagement with women's experiences as foundations for truth-telling about the malignancy of patriarchy, its intertwinement with other structural inequalities and cultural change as well as policy and legal reform. Women's Studies programs, which came out of this period have been profoundly influential across academia on a global scale. Of particular theoretical value, relevant to Khan's exegesis of trauma, are feminist writings about the value of situating the author's positionality explicitly in research and subsequently in texts. Authorial self-reflexive positionality underscores the ways in which lived experiences and resulting perspectives shape topics of concerns, research methodologies, and knowledge construction processes. The second wave feminist tenet that the personal is political pervades feminisms everywhere in the world. This is because women's own experiences of marginalization, subjugation, glass ceilings, and more ominously, oppressive violence (both physical and psychological) have been the driving forces of feminist thought and activism. Kahn explicitly asserts this feminist standpoint, stating that, "I gave a talk on women's empowerment and the role of women in education [at the Government Degree College in Beerwah Central Kashmir] ...in 2018. Again, my attempt was to encourage students to voice their opinions without fear of reprisal" (58). When women students remained reticent and a young man asked why, "...one of the female students in the room...acerbically said that girls / women had not been allowed to share their opinions with the communities they were part of without fear of being mocked or excoriated" reminding "her male peers that they had not become acculturated to notions of gender equality" (58). This was a pivotal incident for Kahn, leading her to assert the importance of "teachers that are passionately invested in and involved with the education process", who build rapport with students, to help them to unpack the power dynamics—gender and otherwise—that structure social inequalities. This is a pedagogical strategy that is at heart scholar-activist; it is work that contributes to a conversation that second, third, and now fourth wave feminist have been

holding since the late 1970s, seeking to embrace life histories, personal narratives, and subjective, self-reflexive approaches to knowledge construction. For these reasons, feminists today, influenced by second and early third wave feminist works, are likely to embrace Khan's own approach and recounting of other trauma healing practices as part of their multidisciplinary perspectives on sociocultural changes. Khan's work implicitly joins in dialogue with feminist works of the period whose insights are now regarded as normative not only for feminist research, but across the social sciences and humanities (although not necessarily acknowledging feminist roots), works such as *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1977); bell hooks' 1984 *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Sandra Harding's *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986) and *Whose Science, Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives* (1991); Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1988); Donna Haraway's 1988 essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*; Gayatri Spivak's writings from the 1980s to her most well-known 1988 essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, and of course Kimberle Crenshaw's 1989, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. All these works argued for a feminist epistemology informed by the varied and overlapping life experiences of women especially those situated at the margins of society. Social structural inequalities such as race, class, gender, caste, dis/ability, and the like are transformed from violences to empowerment and solidarity. These writings reject the assumed norm of white, western, colonial, and largely (but not exclusively) male stance of objectivity that denies positionality / situated knowledges. As hooks (1984), referring to Black Americans, wrote:

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body...Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole. This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity (9).

These feminist epistemologies center women's stories: *herstories*, and while the many narratives Khan shares of those suffering from transgenerational trauma are stories of men too, the personal journey she recounts is a herstory. Her book falls within the trajectory of these works, adding a crucial South Asian diasporic voice, reminding me of Haraway's call for "a feminist objectivity that is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object" but instead, that which, "allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see". Both Haraway and Khan locate knowledge claims as partial, not totalizing, and therefore, responsible (Haraway, 568). Khan accomplishes this goal through the organization of her book, the pervasive presence of her own voice and conversational style, as well as the many narrative examples of learning moments—tense teaching situations in which students' own transmitted trauma have demanded from her creative pedagogical responses. These turn the book into a journey of her own discovery in which she learns to help her students to transform trauma into empowerment, while critiquing educational approaches that hide truths to promote their own narratives of cultural hegemony.

The book consists of eight chapters followed by two appendices. The introductory chapter offers an intellectual framework for recognizing the nature of collective trauma emerging out of societal conflicts. Khan explains that Holocaust literature has played an important role in helping her to understand the nature of Holocaust consciousness. She noted “Members of various victim groups can communicate with one another and learn about strategies of healing psychological traumas in parts of the world that have been degraded by the instruments of militarization, increasing influence of the military in civilian affairs, normalization of sexual violence, insidiousness of institutional discrimination, hegemonic narratives of the state as well as torture, and those having difficulty reengaging with society” (4). She observes both from Holocaust studies and postcolonial research, citing Frantz Fanon, that the development of a group consciousness of collective suffering is critical for individuals to recognize the relationship between individual and societal alienation (5). This framework lays the foundation for examining the damaging emotional and mental trauma (8) experienced by youth in Jammu and Kashmir. Khan shares data from Doctors Without Borders indicating that “...on average, an adult in the Kashmir valley’ had either ‘witnessed or experienced 7.7’ devastating ‘events during his / her lifetime’” (10). These numbers, followed by examples of violence, lead her to conclude that there needs to be a “trauma-informed approach to justice” (10) that centers robust discourse and airing of differences of opinion, ultimately allowing the people of Jammu and Kashmir to be full, participating members of the Indian state.

This ideal, however, is hindered by the persistence of intergenerational trauma, the challenges of communicating within family groups and communities—a necessity, Khan argues, for healing “...the wounds caused by the brutalization of societies” among the “victims of the terrors of insurgency and counterinsurgency” (17). Accountability is the focus of Chapter 2, which involves self-scrutiny. The chapter offers several brief vignettes of individuals who have reconciled the inconsistency between loving someone who has brutalized by committing themselves to helping victims of that brutality. Khan is particularly influenced by Japanese Sociologist Akiko Hashimoto’s study of Japanese families during WWII, who were described as having “overriding guilt about having witnessed or perpetrated the brutality of war” while also being subject to the dangers of internalization and silence.

Chapter 3 is especially important in outlining how education policy that impacts textbook content can create dangerously simplistic views of the complexity of human cultures fueling conflicts. Textbooks can also subvert the process of societal healing by indoctrinating malleable young minds (27). The current insidious and misguided attacks by the U.S. Republican Party on Critical Race Theory as twisted efforts to silence the history of US genocide of Native Americans and to soften the brutal history of enslavement to quash growing awareness of systemic racism among the US public are part of the same process harnessed by right wing, authoritarian governments globally. Khan explicates what happened in India, when government’s central body for finalizing textbook curriculum, the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) created a fictional history as part of its Hindu nationalist agenda. The new textbook for Social Sciences and History published in 2002 erases the Indus Valley Civilization, replacing it with a “mythical ‘Indus-Saraswati’ Civilization. This is an example of an extreme form of nationalism, an “entitlement ideology” (30) that stymies “the growth of critical intelligence, curtailing the ability of students to critically engage with a multiplicity of opinions and points of view, and the entrenching of monolithic discourses” (29-31). Obstruction of critical thinking and

inhibiting creative power is dangerous, Khan explains, contributing to youth indoctrination of simplistic portraits of societies and populations, such as the example of the Nazi youth movement. Khan draws a parallel between the indoctrination of German youth with the Hitlerian worldview, with the current intentions of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to “imbue education with the exclusionary ideology of Hindutva” (27-28). In both cases, cultures of fear of “others” are the result, inculcating prejudice and advocacy for atrocities.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn toward empowering pedagogies rooted in dialogue that help participants move beyond bounded identities to see themselves not only as members of specific groups but as part of humanity. Love of one’s culture and religion does not necessitate hatred of others; however, the challenge of reinforcing a sense of in-group identity while simultaneously building dialogues across identities is posed by this chapter.

When group identity is built on distrust of others, including educators, then youth join a culture of fear that precludes educational interventions. However, “by joining together we can defeat bigotry, racism, intolerance, and prejudice, and care for the poor, the disadvantaged, and those affected by natural and human-made disasters” Khan argues, citing a previous work, “A Dynamic World Requires Inclusion and Diversity” (45). Chapter 5 builds on this idea, offering rich examples of Khan’s own pedagogical experiences building rapport with students, highlighting examples of empowerment through teaching innovations that challenge “the normalization of armed conflict and its ramifications” (70).

Chapter 6 delves into a few participatory educational methodologies that have been harnessed in ongoing and post-conflict situations worldwide. These are not limited to the classroom and are provided as tools for survivors of trauma in a number of group situations. Examples include: Tauber’s “Practical Empowerment Training” for victims of sexual abuse, child soldiers, war veterans and others particularly in African countries; renowned psychiatrist Victor E. Frankl’s revolutionary approach to psychotherapy, logotherapy outlined in *Man’s Search for Meaning* following his trauma surviving four Nazi death camps; South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings following the end of the racist apartheid regime; and contemporary social movements, including Black Lives Matter. Khan shares her personal exchanges with those promoting these healing methodologies in this far-reaching chapter that demonstrates that there is a wealth of approaches that educators can draw from to ‘mold students not just intellectually but as functional members of families and communities as well. Deploying pedagogical tools as catalysts for verbalizing sociocultural trauma gives students a meaningful voice in addition to contributing to family and community healing” (95).

Nyla Khan recounts multiple situations in her classroom between students of opposing ideological camps, including students who viewed Dr. Khan through their own ideological lenses, assuming her views because of her family tree. Khan shares how she navigated away from classroom conflicts mirroring wider socio-political and cultural conflicts. The classroom, in other words, is presented as a microcosm of wider sociopolitical processes that instructors are morally bound to tackle. Khan shares these intimacies in candid discussions. These personal and personable vignettes allow her to take readers along on her journey, the pathway that led her to her emancipatory pedagogy that we are all invited to join. The discussion she shares provides examples that are applicable to present events.

Indeed, as many university professors and high school teachers are all too-aware, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated an existing mental health crisis in youth, one that we are grappling with and which too many of us feel unprepared to address, especially those of us who are not trained in mental health interventions. In fact, the encouragement of trigger-warnings when teaching about various forms of physical and psychological violence have opened discussions across the academy about how to teach about the many conflicts—interpersonal and societal—that plague our planet. Khan’s approach offers help in this regard, showing how pedagogy can heal and foster resilience.

Chapter 7 delves deeply into Victor Frankl’s influence on Khan’s philosophical approach to profound suffering, finding relevant his emergence out of “utter desperation and despair” in the struggle for survival. Frankl’s idea of logotherapy counseling relies on the central pillar of human meaning-making. Khan observes that there is a critical moment at which people can choose to “embrace her/his dignity or sink to the depths of barbarity”, and that this is determined by being able “to fulfill ‘a concrete assignment’ for the completion of which she/he is accountable” (102-103). In situations where conflict has rendered social life unrecognizable, as for example in “the marginalization or criminalization of an individual’s culture in a majoritarian state of a totalitarian regime rips her/his kinship relationships and social fabric apart” (103) of particular importance is the role of “keeping good memories alive and vibrant.” Intergenerational memories not only break cultures of silence, but ensure “that while remaining grounded, people look toward the future” (110). Here we see a connection between feminist calls for storytelling, locating life histories within broader cultural narratives to make meaning out of intersecting oppressions that seek to invisibilize and marginalize. These processes are relevant everywhere since the pain of life, Khan recounts in her concluding chapter, is everywhere. Bringing readers to her current home in Oklahoma, Khan closes by urging readers to acknowledge this reality as a sign of great strength that permits us to take the journey she has prescribed, personally, collectively and ultimately as a species to transform trauma into meaningful lives.

Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones makes a valuable addition to upper level undergraduate and graduate courses in anthropology, education, South Asian studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, psychology, social work, women’s and gender studies and sociology. For scholars of trauma studies, feminist postcolonial thought, and education policymakers in particular, but not exclusively, the book offers a valuable interdisciplinary intervention by rejecting academic silos, bringing scholar-activist and empathetic lenses into their own work and into the classroom.

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