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## Book Review: Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia

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***Book Review: Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia***<sup>1</sup>

Jaelyn E. Glennemeier<sup>2</sup>

In May of 2017 Musarrat Ahmad Zeb, a member of the National Assembly of Pakistan, shocked international observers by claiming that the shooting of Malala Yousafzai by a member of the Taliban had been staged. She insisted that Malala was not unique in her identity as an educated Muslim girl and then proceeded to list the names of other Pakistani girls seeking formal education; the “not Malalas.” According to Shenila Khoja-Moolji, this statement by a Pakistani official reveals an underlying anxiety over the discourse that had formed around Malala as a figure. The outcry over the shooting, which occurred in 2012 and garnered international attention, had reconfigured Malala as a courageous girl who fought against her own repressive culture to seek the privileges and liberatory affordances of education. She quickly became a transnational icon representing secular modernity and the fight for girls’ empowerment through education across the globe.

This contemporary, transnational discourse on girls’ education provides the foundation for Khoja-Moolji’s book *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia*. She critiques both bad and good faith international actors who tout education as the solution to complicated and contextual instances of violence. Khoja-Moolji notes that the image of the ideal, empowered girl – embodied by figures like Malala – creates a binary against the trope of the repressed Muslim girl; a discursive bifurcation that can then be transplanted onto any Muslim female subject. This reduction of the Muslim female figure to a site for political and cultural discourse is evidenced in countless articles and humanitarian campaigns linking Malala’s attack to other acts of violence and oppression against Muslim girls. Khoja-Moolji identifies this Muslim woman/girl as a site which has been historically dictated by a broad range of social actors debating proper social orders. As early as the twentieth century, discussions of Muslim girls’ and women’s education are where many of these debates took shape. Khoja-Moolji interrogates these debates and argues that articulations of Muslim female subjectivity are formed by class, familial, nationalist, and hetero-patriarchal interests and therefore demand considerations of the complex local contexts within transnational feminist projects.

Khoja-Moolji makes it clear that her book does not tell a traditional teleological narrative of progressive change over time, but rather includes a series of overlapping and often competing articulations of educated girlhood mapped by national, familial, economic, religious and social concerns. However, in tracing these knowledge-making practices, Khoja-Moolji insists they are historically contingent and therefore structures her book to highlight shifting discourses in three distinct moments.

The first moment begins at the turn of the twentieth century in colonial British India. Khoja-Moolji uses government documents, speeches, novels and periodicals to understand anxieties over social

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<sup>1</sup> Khoja-Moolji; S. (2018). *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

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status and gendered spaces as articulated in debates over women's education. In Chapter Three, "Desirable and Failed Citizen-Subjects" she shifts to the mid-twentieth century, examining the imaginings of educated female subjects in the first decades following the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. In this period, Khoja-Moolji argues, women and girls were cast as either modern subjects who sought equal rights in the interest of national projects or failed subjects who were either too religious or too Western. Lastly, Chapters Four and Five look closely at the contemporary moment of twenty-first century postcolonial Pakistan. Khoja-Moolji attempts to show how transnational networks are negotiated in local contexts, complicating the narratives of education as empowerment and critiquing "self-making" as a strategy for pro-market projects. Finally, she concludes her study with a review of the overlapping shifts in discourse detailed throughout the book and points to the systems of power that produce them. Rather than offering a tidy conclusion to her findings, Khoja-Moolji lays bare the political stakes of her study for not only feminist scholars and activists, but also for the lives of Muslim women and girls.

Khoja-Moolji describes her book as a genealogy of the educated Muslim girl that investigates the internal relationships of power in colonial India and Pakistan and how these institutions created competing ideals of girlhood. Such an examination of institutions draws from Foucauldian theories of governmentality and examinations of discursive practices. This methodology puts *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl* in conversation not only with historians of colonialism, South Asia, and the Middle East but also with feminist poststructuralist scholars like Judith Butler who study how gender intersects with other subject positions as well as the practices that shape them. Critical to this approach is Khoja-Moolji's decentering of the Muslim girl as a subject and a focus on the cultural, state, familial, and religious practices that produce her as a site for various discourses. In doing so, Khoja-Moolji avoids essentializing the characteristics of the various female subjects in her sources such as the colonial *sharif bibi* or the contemporary Pakistani student. She does this while tracing stories of class preservation, norms of respectability, exploitation of women's labor, and political agency across time. Her ability to pull forth nonreductive narratives makes *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl* a valuable contribution to other scholarly critiques of the transnational, neoliberal turn that has touted emancipatory readings of education and reduced women of the Global South to binaries of heroines and victims.

Importantly, Khoja-Moolji's contribution to this body of work transcends simplistic dismissals of neoliberalism and transnational empowerment campaigns. She meticulously demonstrates how these various discourses are negotiated and rejected in local contexts. Her most innovative execution of this discursive approach takes place in Chapter Four, "The Empowered Girl." Here, Khoja-Moolji interrogates the promises and anxieties attached to the figure of the educated girl in twenty-first century Pakistan. Moving away from a written, historical archive, she uses her fieldwork in Pakistan where she conducted focus group conversations with girls, parents, and teachers in the community she grew up in and where she has often volunteered as an educator. Asking open ended questions about their engagement with schooling, Khoja-Moolji takes the answers of her interviewees as performative, narrating their educational trajectories and desire. One might be skeptical of a study that reads the answers given in interviews as performance—claiming this strategy may run the risk of delegitimizing agency. However, Khoja-Moolji expertly contextualizes the individual experiences of education with the political, social, and religious discourses that shape them. Guided by her intimate knowledge and empathy toward the community, she joins a growing body of critique in postcolonial feminist studies which unveils

the burdens of transnational education discourses. Rather than promote liberation, discussions of education embody a regulatory function and technique of governmentality which places the responsibility of combating structural oppression on Muslim women/girls self-improvement.

The ambitious methods and scope of *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl* are aided by Khoja-Moolji's impressive assemblage of archival materials. In each period she uses a variety of cultural texts including government documents, speeches, novels, biographies, advertisements, periodicals, and television to access debates over what constitutes failed and ideal female subjects. These debates are contingent upon but also transcend their historical contexts as Khoja-Moolji expertly demonstrates in her analysis of Nazir Ahmed's 1896 didactic novel *Mirat-ul-uroos* (The Bride's Mirror) and its subsequent televised adaptations in 2011 and 2012. One of the more salient aspects of her archive-making includes incorporating women's writings often featured in diaries, letters, and reformist literature which Khoja-Moolji argues have been ignored in the traditional archive. She sees her project as a political one, bringing forth these texts in which "women emerge as thoughtful, engaged, and politically active, even as they struggle within the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures" (155). Using Wendy Hesford's practice of reading "intercontextually," Khoja-Moolji not only interprets the contested ideals of girlhood the texts produce, but also the social, political, and cultural practices that produce the texts.

Importantly, Khoja-Moolji acknowledges the limits of her methodology and selection of archival materials, which privileges middle-class, modern Muslim girls and women through whom the discourses of education are often produced. Poorer women and girls are largely excluded from the texts she examines, though they are disproportionately impacted by the class-differentiated education systems which often force them into the informal labor market. Khoja-Moolji suggests the possibility of reading the texts in her study "against the grain" to access some insights into the lives of poor women, but ultimately concedes that such an endeavor also has its restrictions. This leaves future scholars, particularly those interested in questions of subalternity, to grapple with methodological obstacles in incorporating the lives of poorer Muslim women into their studies of transnational discourses and Muslim female subjectivity. Such a task is crucial if indeed the ultimate objective of this work is to address the contradicting, complex, and overlapping systems of oppression that burden Muslim women.

*Forging the Ideal Educated Girl* is an excellent contribution to postcolonial feminist scholarship, narrating overlapping stories of class preservation, labor exploitation, fluid gender categories, and political agency that transverse spatial and temporal boundaries through the discourse of education. Khoja-Moolji methodological approach serves as a model for scholars interested in complexities and negotiations of transnational discourses in local contexts. More importantly, Khoja-Moolji's work is an essential read for feminist activists and allies looking to critically analyze conditions of subjugation and structures of violence that the discourse of the ideal, educated Muslim girl so often obfuscates.