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Anthropology Book Forum

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Khoja-Moolji, Shenila, 2023, *Rebuilding Community: Displaced Women and the Making of a Shia Ismaili Muslim Sociality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 272 pp., ISBN 9780197642030

“Rebuilding Community: Displaced Women and the Making of a Shia Ismaili Muslim Sociality” by Shenila Khoja-Moolji is a poignant ethnography that aims to understand the lives of Ismaili women in the diaspora. It is an insightful scholarly work that provides a rare, nuanced analysis of the experiences of Ismaili Muslim women who were displaced from East Africa and East Pakistan in the 1970s and settled in West Pakistan, England, Canada, and the United States.

Theoretically, Khoja-Moolji focuses on the ethics of care that these women use to rebuild their communities after displacement. In doing so, she explores how ordinary ethical practices of care are critical to cultivating an Ismaili sociality that enables women to practice their faith in everyday contexts. Throughout the book, ‘spiritualized socialities’ (7) are invoked both as a concept and as a lived and sensorial experience, thus revealing new paths for theorizing care at the intersection of Divine Will. Not to mention, in understanding how care work is intimately tied to spirituality and ‘placemaking,’ (20) it joins a growing body of anthropological scholarship on care that goes beyond its economic and productivist logic.

Further, her ethnography exemplifies a move forward within the anthropology of religion that usually focuses on the gap between religious morality and ordinary ethics; instead, Khoja-Moolji focuses on demonstrating how people enact ethical moral codes between themselves and within communities. With occasional personal touches, the book alternates between ethnography and oral history, literature, memories, and intergenerational stories, making it both ethnographically and theoretically compelling.

The book consists of seven chapters engaging its audience in the wider discussions on religious community formation of diasporic Ismaili women and their placemaking activities. With ethnographic vignettes and historical records of violent displacement, the introduction sets the stage for the rest of the book. It demonstrates how diasporic Ismaili women cultivate kinship relations intergenerationally through voluntary and everyday acts of care in the *jamatkhanas* (Ismaili houses of gathering and worship). These ordinary practices of care, for example, through cleaning, cooking, and caring for the elderly, Khoja-Moolji argues, are acts of spiritual sociality. Such socialities facilitate a fashioning of ethical relationality between members of the faith community and the Divine (26). In closing, the Introduction discusses the author's critical positionality as someone deeply familiar with their interlocutors' religious sensibilities. Khoja-Moolji refers to this as 'faithful witnessing' (31) - a hermeneutic tool that enhances the researcher's engagement with the things they see, especially the rhythms of her interlocutors' religious beliefs. Khoja-Moolji's epistemological goal of writing about her interlocutors' experiences from within builds upon the work of scholars like Kirin Narayan and Amy Moran-Thomas who have theorized a move beyond the concepts of "native" and "non-native" ethnographers.

The second chapter reconstructs the migration of first-generation Ismaili women from India to East Africa and East Pakistan using childhood memories of interlocutors. It's a feminist story of Ismaili community migration between 1890 and 1970 that celebrates women's life worlds, their struggles with displacements across continents, educational aspirations, and self-care practices that are often forgotten or obscured into the background of male-centered Ismaili history. Yet, it does not solely aim at uncovering these lost voices, but focuses more on what women's activities reveal about Ismaili ethical subjectivities (35). In other words, the book is also about movements that observe how care and kinship practices traverse time, places, bodies, selves, memories, violence, hopes, and imaginations.

Examining the historically significant role of *jamatkhanas* in Ismaili communities (86), the third chapter takes a deep dive into women's placemaking activities. It's important to note, however, that placemaking in this context is not limited to *jamatkhanas*' physical infrastructure. Khoja-Moolji deftly shows that women had often transformed their homes and makeshift living situations into sacred spaces through mundane caregiving she calls *seva* (88). *Seva* for these women in the

jamatkhanas was at once social, spiritual, and agential. As opposed to refocusing on the gendered elements of women's caregiving, this argument elegantly emphasizes how mundane care practices can transform women's spiritual lives for generations to come.

In Khoja-Moolji's book, miracles have as much a place in women's placemaking as they are about more tangible care duties. The fourth chapter is a story of divine intervention and miracles or *moujza* (132) in the life worlds of Ismaili community in the diaspora. By drawing on the works of religious studies scholars such as Amira Mittermaier and Annalisa Butticci, Khoja-Moolji calls for paying close attention to interlocutors' stories of miracles 'that evade the power of the gaze' (137) and defy western-centered logic. As a result, we learn about the miracles experienced by the first-generation Ismaili women and the community as a whole. However, focusing on stories of second-generation Ismaili women, Khoja-Moolji also establishes how miracles were not closed in memory as static reverberations, but were revived intergenerationally. These stories of divine intervention in Ismaili lives are an important ethnographic addition to the scholarship on anthropology of Islam that continues to be held hostage to western rationality.

A lively fifth chapter takes us down the path of women's culinary placemaking. Using cookbooks as historical artifacts of women's quotidian labor, Khoja-Moolji shows how heritage food played a significant role in recreating religious life in the diaspora. She argues that cookbooks offer an aspirational and healing space to women bringing families and communities together.

Moving forward, the sixth chapter focuses specifically on second-generation Ismaili women born in the US and Canada. She analyzes the shift in women's perspectives on migration, placemaking, and ethical subjectivities. As circumstances change in a global world, Khoja-Moolji argues that women experience the *jamat* as more 'transethnic, transnational, and translingual' (170). Yet, she argues, that women are not disengaged or any less spiritual but more creative of their Ismaili identities. Furthermore, according to Khoja-Moolji these circumstances also altered how women discussed their traumatic migration memories as 'postmemories' (173). These postmemories of political instability and violence, she argues, are lived vicariously through stories, novels, and photographs. Using the methodological tools and techniques of imagination and speculation in literature and history proposed by Saidiya Hartman, Khoja-Moolji explores the visceral

experiences of migration felt by second-generation Ismaili women. The chapter weaves ethnographic vignettes beautifully with novel excerpts and creative works of artists to illustrate how the new-age generations now settled in the US and Canada grapple with the traumas of the past, rebuild communities, and practice the ethics of *seva*.

A concluding seventh chapter ties together the themes of migrant placemaking, care ethics, and community building in Shia Islam. Khoja-Moolji reflects on moral and ethical codes of Ismaili sociality and unglamorous tasks of care work performed by women on a daily basis. Her rich and detailed ethnography is a much-needed addition to the literature on Islamic theology that usually undertakes a normative male-centered view of Islamic ethics. In addition, it marks a careful attempt to move away from the overemphasis on rationality that often characterizes scholarship on the anthropology of ethics.

Khoja-Moolji's book is notable for the way in which she discusses the real and imaginative processes that entail the concept of "relationality," not just among humans but also between humans and the Divine. There is no doubt that her book is a decolonial intervention within anthropology of religion that aims to engage with what is beyond the gaze of the ethnographer. In that, her positionality as someone deeply familiar with the context helps "native" ethnographers, such as myself, to move beyond the stifled conception of "going native."

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