

Saba Hussain, *Contemporary Muslim Girlhoods in Assam: A study of Social Justice, Identity and Agency in Assam*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2019), pp 148, Rs. 9340, hbk, (ISBN 9781138606449).

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The larger project that Hussain has undertaken in this book is to understand the subjectivities or subjective possibilities available to understand Muslim girls in Assam and how they negotiate with those in their everyday life. These subjectivities are interrogated among school going girls through inquiring educational policies, taking narratives of teachers and parents. Hussain's book appears to be a timely intervention in several aspects. She takes up a hitherto unexplored anthropological issue. In the existing body of academic literature, Muslim subject and subjectivities are discussed more in terms of politics/political rather than as a subject matter of anthropological enquiry. There is a lack of understanding of Muslim female subjectivities in Assam and Hussain's intervention is an in-depth analysis to bridge that gap. There exists a multiple and intersecting differences among Muslim females in Assam in terms of class, and linguistic identity, along with the 'popular' native muslim/migrant Muslim binary. Hussain considers these multiple and crucial aspects while interrogating the subjectivities of Muslim school going girls in the town of Nagaon, Assam.

The work begins with some fundamental concerns about 'Muslim women' as a subject in general and their position in various legal, social, religious, sexual and political contexts. In fact there stands a popular binary where Muslim girls are pitted against that image of 'empowered girl'—that is formed and solidified by media, and other popular mediums like films. This binary is very strong to dislodge irrespective of the fact that several scholars and activists are challenging it through their works. Within this context, this book comes as an important intervention

to understand the subjectivities or as Hussain says, 'subjective possibilities' made available to school going Muslim girls in contemporary India—with specific emphasis on Assam. The study looks at the dominant discourse on Muslim women through personal narrative of school going Muslim children considering their social location and varied contexts. Within this context, Hussain's work challenges the idea that Muslim girls in India 'uniformly shares the burden of oppression' and looks at Muslims of girls of Nagaon in Assam through multiple and intertwined identities through their own narratives (p.6). Muslims in Assam is a heterogeneous category in terms of class, ethnicity, language, and considering these differences and multiplicity in experiences the study provides an epistemological injunction to interrogate the responses by/of Muslim girls on the subjective possibilities made available to them by the larger social structure. Thus, it questions the construction of a singular category of 'Muslim girl' by exploring their ways of negotiating with the existing notion of Muslim girl-childhood in Assam. On a theoretical level, the study locates itself in the post-colonial colonial context where the aim is to understand the construction of gendered minority subjects (p.11).

The theoretical aspects of the book consider issues of intersectional injustice, complexity of multiple belongingness and issues of agency of Muslim girls in Assam. Drawing from the existing literature, where data shows that the Muslim women in contemporary India performs poorly in terms socio-economic parameters, the study locate those empirical indicators in the context of Assam. The educational policies of the post-colonial state, narrative post teachers and parents are analyzed in this part. The empirical aspect of the study deals with the complex issues of 'socio-economic, political and historical aspects of migration, post-colonial nation-building, ethno-nationalist identity formation, and the unmet developmental needs of Assam' (p.12).

Referring to several educational and government schemes of scholarship, Hussain observes that these scholarships schemes, both at pre-and-post high school level, authorize an economically subordinate subjectivity to Muslim girls, which also subsumes their gender identity. The religious identities of Muslim girls are conflated with their class identity like in the cases of how lower caste identity is conflated with that of lower class. This process is also part of the broader 'segregation' and 'cultural difference' of Muslims from mainstream educational policies where gender segregation, instructions in Urdu is highlighted as the cause – by the mainstream discourse. Considering the differences and framing of Muslim girl in School, Hussain's work deals with the issue of how *Miyah* (Bengali speaking Muslims) in Assam is categorized as the 'other' and overtly religious due to their veils used in school; separating them from Hindu girls. The casual attitude of *Miyah* girls towards learning and not being attentive to studies – is as seen and observed by a female non-Muslim teacher is a function of the cultural deficit at home. Interrogating the idea of merit and scholarship, Hussain writes about the creation of the binary between hard working Hindu girls without a scholarship and undeserving Muslim girl who benefits from the scholarships. The devaluation of Muslim girl students with stereotypes like 'jabor' analysed in her work could be juxtaposed with the ways of how Dalits are often stereotyped to be 'meritless'. Her anthropological insight tells us how this reflects largely upper-caste Hindu and middle class narrative to maintain social hierarchy of domination and subordination. Hussain further points out at the class angle, by arguing that even a Muslim middle class teacher could think the same way about stereotypes surrounding merit.

Hussain's work on Muslim girls in schools also reflects the linguistic aspect of identity and the issues of Assamese nationalism and language. Assamese language is set as a standard to communicate with a proper accent – and *Miyah* Muslim girls who have a distinct way of speaking Assamese are burdened

to learn the 'actual accent' – to negotiate with their otherness. Hussain argues that the teachers by virtue of their habitus make implicit and explicit judgment on Muslim girl students, based on their material condition and 'cultural behavior'. In this context, the differences between "the middleclass, predominantly Hindu teachers' habitus and the 'Miyah' girls' habitus become operational as their disproportionate power of conferring identities in the field of education" (p.78). The study also critically engages with the varied material conditions of Muslim parents and the ways they cope up with the materiality of poverty by choosing madrasa education for their girl child to groom them as an 'ideal' mother in future. The study also attempts to interrogate how these Muslim schoolgirls counters and negotiates the stereotypes attached with them regarding their religious identity in their everydayness – including food, history syllabus, dressing. In fact, in many cases, as Hussain writes, there are instances where some girls, in an act of subversion – hit back on the all the stereotypes and bullying – when there is no choice left. There is also an assertion, at times, of a proud 'Miyah' subjectivity that enables them to invest their ethnic identity with positive meanings.

Overall, the study while interrogating Muslim girl childhood in Assam also highlights debates on ethnic identity, Assamese linguistic nationalism, and intersectional Muslim girl identity, issues of sexuality and Muslim girlhood, class difference between Muslims and Hindus and among Muslims located in a small town in Assam.