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Book Review Forum

Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Rebuilding Community: Displaced Women and the Making of a Shia Ismaili Muslim Sociality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9780197642030 (paper); ISBN: 9780197642023 (cloth); ISBN: 9780197642054 (ebook)

Introduction—Shehnaz Haqqani, Mercer University

This book review forum emerged from "Author Meets Critics" sessions organized by the American Academy of Religion, the National Women's Studies Association, and the Association for Feminist Ethics and Social Theory at their 2023 annual meetings on Shenila Khoja-Moolji's *Rebuilding Community: Displaced Women and the Making of a Shia Ismaili Muslim Sociality*. Select panelists who engaged with the book subsequently agreed to share their comments for publication. The scholars come from diverse fields—Sociology, Gender Studies, International Studies, and Islamic Studies—which signals the broad interdisciplinary reach of the book. Each commentary focuses on ideas that appealed most to the scholars—from the making of sacred spaces and migrant geographies, to religious practices of second-generation Muslims, and the politics of reproductive labor. The book thus speaks to a wide range of scholars, and we hope a wider range of readers too.

Commentary 1—Shehnaz Haqqani, Mercer University

Rebuilding Community is a powerful story of location and dislocation, about community formation, about love and nurturing, about making sense of one's history through memory, about faith and resilience. It is an effort to archive the invisible and underappreciated labor of displaced peoples, documenting in particular the lived experiences of displaced Ismaili Muslim women in the diaspora. Through interviews with dozens of women and a few men of multiple generations, as well as archival research, Khoja-Moolji's very careful research explores how Ismaili spiritualized sociality has been produced across generations. Through it all, we learn about women's experiences with education and literacy in Ismaili history, about the ways the *jamatkhana* (Ismaili space for worship and gathering) was constructed and how it has evolved in new contexts, and about the *jamat*, or religious sociality, as an "ethical relation that is maintained daily and intergenerationally through everyday acts of care" (p.10). We learn about the religiosity and spirituality of those suffering from displacement, forced migration, relocation, about the kinds of work that women did, and about what their daily life and struggles were like. We also learn about the ways that these women understand and apply the concept of *seva*, or service and devotion to their community, as not simply and merely paying it forward because they too were helped in a time of need by their community, but as service to the community, to God, to the Imam—so ultimately as an expression of their faith.

In particular, *Rebuilding Community* offers a nuanced and excellent analysis of race involving the racial dynamics of the people the British pitted against each other in East Africa, which harnessed and intensified the anti-Blackness of the Asians who lived in East Africa. The author refers to this, citing other theorists, as "differential racialization" within a colonial matrix. The Asians, including Ismailis, were thus both victims of anti-Indian racism *and* simultaneously perpetrators of anti-Black racism. I was especially moved by the author's inclusion of the second generation as they reflected on their ancestors' involvement in racial exploitation while being an exploited group themselves. We encounter Yasmin Alibhai-Brown in Chapter 5, author of a memoir and a cookbook, who reflects on these injustices and calls out the role of white supremacy and colonialism in racial divisions in East Africa. When Khoja-Moolji asks Yasmin about the origins and purpose of her books, Yasmin explains that she:

> wanted the British to know, to read this book and say [to them], "We are here because you were *there*. *You* [emphasizes and then pauses] brought us from India, my ancestors, to a country, you did *nothing* to help us *feel* African. In fact, you divided us and kept us apart, that resulted in this terrible history … and then we come here. Because of your politics we end up here. Because you supported Idi Amin, you brought him into power. He threw us out." So, I wanted that story told. (p.150)

Furhana, another interlocuter of the author's, also expresses the importance of critical self-reflection. And so, one of the most significant findings of the book is that the second generation's practice of care changes in accordance with the new contexts—they are not the ones who directly experienced displacement and migration, but they call out and stand up against the ways that their ancestors perpetrated anti-Blackness against Africans while also reflecting on and recognizing the contexts in which those injustices took place amidst patriarchy (e.g. their mothers and grandmothers not having the luxury and freedom to be able to interact with their African neighbors the way their male members of the community did because of gendered exclusion). This new generation then is interpreting service—*seva*—in ways that are very different from their parents' and grandparents' generations. They apply their Shia Ismaili teachings on justice and equality to contemporary life in America, using movements and language like Black Lives Matter, being witness to anti-Blackness, and justice for Indigenous peoples.

Khoja-Moolji reminds us that while some of the activities that the women perform in service to the community might reinforce women's gendered participation in Ismaili religious life, we can also acknowledge that women performed different services than men. At the same time, however, we can recognize that their services were meaningful ways through which they enacted devotion to the Imam and the community. I agree that just because women's labor is gendered does not mean it's not meaningful. But the unevenness of the labor is important to highlight. The women are the ones waking up early in the morning, volunteering in the community, and then also doing work inside the house—even if it is making lunch for their

husbands and grown sons. But when these women explain that they, say, clean the toilets at *jamatkhana* because it is the Imam's house, or that they are getting the *barakah* (blessing) of the service to others, I wonder about why their choices of ethical care are gendered such that they relieve men of similar acts of care. Why does women's work remain conveniently gendered in this way? Whereas men's work is recognized and rewarded, the women's work remains mostly invisible. These women are doing so much, but, as acknowledged in the book, it is the men who have access to a much wider range of service activities, including leadership and decision-making positions but somehow not cooking or cleaning, for example. One woman even tells her story of not having any access to the *jamatkhana*'s leadership anymore because she is divorced; faith leadership positions for women (*mukhiani* and *kamadiani*), in most cases, require that the woman be married. Again, to highlight, I recognize that the entire focus on care work is because for many women, care work has a deeply spiritual dimension, and this care work is connected to the experience of divine grace in everyday life. But it is also clearly a lot more than that because of the patriarchal structures of power and hierarchy at play here. And that is why, in the conclusion of the book, Khoja-Moolji calls for such care work to be performed by all.

Rebuilding Community also shows that the Imam's role is vital in the lives of Ismailis. We learn that women communicated their concerns to Aga Khan III about patriarchal practices that prevented them from pursuing higher education, and he issued significant and life-changing edicts to ensure they thrived. Still, I wonder about what an analysis of some of the Imam's actions might look like. For example, he removes the veil of Sikina Lalani on her wedding day when she and her husband went to visit him for blessings. He teaches about English etiquette such as wearing knee-length dresses to fit into colonial society. The author does note the racial issues here and the power dynamics: "Running in parallel … to the story of Ismaili community interiority is a second narrative of exclusion and competition with out-groups, which was not incidental but an essential feature of British colonial racial capitalism in East Africa" (p.60). Specifically, his removal of the veil from a woman to me read very similarly to Habib Bourgiba's removal of the veil from women in the 1950s in an effort towards modernization. To be sure, of course, the Imam's relationship with Ismaili women is crucially different from Bourgiba's relationship with Tunisian women. The removal of the veil is nonetheless symbolic.

Books like this are why we have always been convinced that writing and publishing is a form of service to the community—*seva* in this case. Chapter 5 ("Culinary Placemaking") convinced me about the reality that there is no such thing as authentic food—though that's not the purpose of the chapter—and that foods tell stories and histories, they're a testimony, they are political; through food, we create and make a home in the diaspora through fusions and interactions. Primarily because food preparation is so gendered, feminized, the task of primarily women members of a community, it does not get the treatment it deserves especially in academic literature and especially I believe in religious and Islamic studies. Khoja-Moolji notes, too, that cookbooks are a vital source of understanding communities, specifically the Ismaili community, but they remain understudied. Food is like the concept of tradition—it tells a story that is added on to by each generation, a story of interactions between different groups of people, different interlocuters. Food becomes a vehicle of resistance (*gora* chicken, literally "white chicken"[!], invented by Asian women in East Africa in response to their white bosses' racism; *gora* chicken sold only to white bosses to make them weep because it was "inhumanely hot"[!!], as we learn in Chapter 5). As long as we have migration, displacement, violence, resilience, a longing for re-building ourselves and our communities, a longing for survival, there will be no such thing as one authentic food.

Rebuilding Community not only recuperates Ismaili women's lives; it leaves us with important learnings about the material, culinary, and affective dimensions of placemaking, about the role of religion in refugee rebuilding processes, and about the urgent need to revalue care and reproductive labor.

Commentary 2—Shruti Devgan, Bowdoin College

The world continues to unravel and fall apart around us, with the heartbreaking and infuriating Israel–Palestine situation, where the voices of some are heard over others, where ethnic cleansing continues to be denied and dismissed. In India, which is where I am from, the Hindu right continues to wreak havoc on Muslim and other minority groups. In the middle of all this turmoil, reading Khoja-Moolji's book *Rebuilding Community* served as a sort of salve or balm. It calmed my frayed nerves to read her rich, engrossing, engaging, and humanistic description of the restorative, healing, and hopeful social, cultural, and spiritual lifeworlds of Ismaili Muslim women, the power of the daily ethics of care and *seva* (altruistic service).

Underlying this book is intense intellectual, cognitive, and emotional labor, innovative and transgressive framing and analysis, but perhaps just as or even more importantly, something missing in a lot of academia: a sense of deep love, attachment, and joy in writing about, documenting, and preserving the stories of a so-far neglected community. Khoja-Moolji focuses in particular on the stories of Ismaili Muslim women who constructed community or *jamat* through constant and persistent work of care, help, and support, during wars and forced migration in two main periods of time: first, while fleeing East Pakistan in the early 1970s because of civil war; and second, when they were forced to leave East Africa in the 1970s during Idi Amin's regime in Uganda and an intensification of anti-Asian feelings in Kenya and Tanzania.

I do not think it would be an exaggeration to describe this historical and ethnographic account of the Ismaili Muslim community in these time periods and places as a tour de force. It is meticulously researched, drawing on a vast variety of sources—including oral history interviews, unpublished or self-published memoirs, personal journals, photographs and cookbooks—and written with great care and devotion, both as a scholar as well as a practicing and believing member of the Ismaili Muslim community. This comes across throughout the book, but especially in Khoja-Moolji's fascinating chapter on miracle stories or *moujza*—an important and refreshing shift in scholarly theory and praxis.

One of the key contributions of the book is in rethinking care work or reproductive labor. In ways some scholars might consider counter-intuitive, Khoja-Moolji explores, constructs, and

makes a case for seeing women's reproductive labor of cooking, cleaning, ethics of care, values of patience, and contentment or *santokh* as resistance rather than subordination. Her interlocutors give meaning to tasks like cleaning *jamatkhanas* (the central place of Ismaili worship and gathering) and cooking for coreligionists as "blessings, privileges, and opportunities offered by the Imam" (p.23). As Khoja-Moolji clarifies, she is not denying the possibility of exploitation in reproductive work, but she underplays it because of how it is perceived by her interlocutors, as well as her own reading, where she posits care work as a life-giving activity that sustains Ismaili religio-social lifeworlds. In the book, Ismaili women, multiply minoritized and strained by gender and minoritarian religion, as well as constrained by experiences of displacement and racism, are not constructed or depicted as dependent and passive, but as occupying more complicated and mostly resilient positions. She also accounts for men's work, but focuses on women, especially everyday women, because their stories are still missing and invisible.

Unlike Marxist feminists who regard housework as a "quintessential site for gendered exploitation" and have sought to move it "into the realm of waged labor", Khoja-Moolji offers a different reading of women's reproductive work including things like "cleaning *jamatkhanas*, cooking during religious festivals, assisting an elder with a bedpan at a refugee camp, and washing ritual objects". She frames "this work in spiritual and relational terms, aligning with those feminist scholars who refuse to reduce women's work to productivist logics" (p.9).

I found this framework enlightening, subversive, and thought-provoking, and would love to see more scholars engage with this framing in the various communities they study. Future scholars might want to reflect on the possibilities and limits of this important feminist, queer paradigm. Khoja-Moolji's framework transgresses and negates Western and Marxist definitions, and she defines reproductive activities through the logic and lens of sociability, repairing past trauma, and creating continuity between generations: "This approach retains 'care' as a useful framework for interpreting relationalities, kinships, and coalitions previously excluded from view. The challenge for me then is to emphasize the salience of care work, and the importance of those who undertake it, while also pointing out the circumstances and scenarios when it becomes a site of subjugation" (p.9).

For the most part Khoja-Moolji navigates this challenge very well, highlighting why she makes a case for women's reproductive labor as sustaining the life of individuals, families, and the larger community. That said, given the book's rich ethnographic and textual data, there is little on *jamat* as a site for subjugation. For example, one of the few places I came across this was in Chapter 3, where one of the women experienced the *jamatkhana* as a less-than-friendly place because of the abusive gaze and touch of a man at the institution, or the mention of some younger interlocutors who reported being bullied in *jamatkhanas* in North America; and other interlocutors who reported conflicts in volunteer committee work, which caused them to avoid attending *jamatkhanas* for months on end. Additional examples would have strengthened this point, but that is a small squabble.

I would like to reflect on three more interrelated themes from the book which further exemplify the book's contribution to feminist theorizing: *seva*, *moujza* stories, and the author's own positionality.

Throughout the book, Khoja-Moolji engages with and explains how Ismaili women cultivate, practice, and construct everyday and seemingly mundane practices of *seva* (service work). These apparently ordinary and routine acts of *seva* in fact sustain and make the community what it is. The community or *jamat* is not a static or rigid entity, but constantly made and re-made by the work that women do, and that remains invisible and unacknowledged. Khoja-Moolji explains this framing at the beginning of the book. Using the example of her own mother, she writes:

> Farida's invocation of *seva*/*khidmat* to describe her care for Zarina [another Ismaili woman living in Atlanta] … points to a set of spiritual commitments that *exceed the idea of serial reciprocity* conveyed by "paying it forward." We instead see an ethical act of support that is set apart from expectation of exchange or calculation of ends. It is deemed virtuous *in and of itself*. Such everyday acts of care, from Farida's perspective, help new migrants find a foothold in unfamiliar environments (Atlanta) while reinforcing affiliation with the Ismaili community … Ordinary ethics like these that respond to the experience of displacement are highly visible in the life stories of the Ismailis I consider

> in this project … it has been the ongoing and pervasive exercise of ordinary ethics of care and support that has produced an Ismaili sociality beyond moments of crisis as well. (p.5-6, emphasis added)

As Khoja-Moolji points out, Ismaili ethics of care is one manner of living a Muslim life that is both similar to and different from other communities. Here I would like to briefly discuss the parallels with another religious-ethnic minority community that I focus on in my research—the Sikhs. My research is on Indian state-sponsored violence against this community in 1984 and the reasons for how and why North American diasporic Sikhs remember these events. As I describe in my work, *seva* in the Sikh community often happens in religio-communal spaces like the Ismaili *jamatkhana*. In the case of Sikhs, this is the *gurdwara*. Community members engage in *seva* at the *gurdwara* by cleaning worshippers' shoes, sweeping the sacred precincts, and helping in the *langar* or community kitchen without caste distinctions. *Seva* is an important part of Sikh practice and theology and also an underlying motivation for memory work around 1984. The culture of *seva* or service to the community defines Sikhs' actions and belief system, including the work of memory, rallying support for suffering members of the community, and commemorating losses of those killed in the 1984 massacres.

There are many different ways that Khoja-Moolji defines *seva* in the book. One way of understanding is a relational aspect of *seva* vis-à-vis the Imam. Contrary to narrow rational and instrumental definitions of relationality confined to the human and mundane, Ismaili women describe *seva* as a "blessing" or favor from the spiritual Imam. As Khoja-Moolji explains, "Agency for pious effort, or *seva* in this case, … does not rest solely with the individual but emerges in a relationship with the Divine" (p.114). Ismaili subjectivity and meaning making, especially in the face of persistent displacement and minoritization, is thus centrally defined in relationship with the Imam. This is an important insight about the Ismaili people and their beliefs.

Another aspect of *seva* was in the scene of miracle storytelling. It is here that Khoja-Moolji extends usual understandings of *seva*. She notes that miracle stories can have an "emplacing effect" as they nourish the faith of both the teller and the listener. In her own words:

> I … view the scene of *moujza* storytelling as one where both the narrator and listener become aware of God's presence via the Imam and the *moujza* story itself as a device for harnessing *iman* (faith). These scenarios bring different generations of Ismailis into closer relationship with each other. Because these are stories that can recall the past as well as shape the *jamat*'s future spiritual state, their narration is an ethical act of community making, both in the here and now and in a broader symbolic sense. (p.123)

I also found Khoja-Moolji's discussion of her own positionality in listening to these miracle stories fascinating and insightful. Her discussion offers an important precedent for other scholars who too would like to research their own communities. She acknowledges that the very reason she was able to listen to these stories from her interlocutors was because she is an insider and a scholar who listens with faith rather than skepticism and doubt. As Khoja-Moolji explains, the disclosure of such stories depends on an "ethical transaction between the narrator and the listener" (p.124), where this transaction assumes shared hermeneutics and an implicit recognition that there exists a realm beyond the *zahir* or apparent. To quote Khoja-Moolji:

> Miracles are by definition disruptive and subversive: they confound our expectations and point instead to a nonhuman, transcendental source at work. Attuned to the invisible, participants recognize that humans are not the only actants in this world, and the apparent (*zahir*) and hidden (*batin*) are not antithetical to each other but coexist in a complementary relationship. (p.137)

For this reason, it is important that the listener be a willing participant in these stories. This is true for listening in any ethnographic encounter, but especially here in the realm of the so-called fantastical. For this reason, issues of trust, credibility, and ethics, but also "spiritual disposition" become very important in these exchanges between interlocutors and researchers. In fact, the usual framing of "interlocutor and researcher" seems inadequate to capture this ethical transaction that Khoja-Moolji writes about. She also tells us that these stories were typically

whispered only at the end of hours-long interviews, and only when the interviews were conducted in intimate settings—such as participant's home or in the corner of a *jamatkhana*. As Khoja-Moolji writes, some of these stories were told to her on the condition that she would not write about them, but "only draw on them for … [her] personal spiritual growth" (p.125). She writes that by the conclusion of her research, she also became a keeper of secrets.

Rebuilding Community is not only a theoretically rich account of a historic minority; it is also a book for our times, as it does the work of repair in our turbulent world.

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Commentary 3—Inaash Islam, Saint Michael's College

It has been a pleasure to read *Rebuilding Community* and familiarize myself with the history and experiences of Nizari Ismaili Muslims.

Khoja-Moolji's book melds ethnographic and historical details to tell a compelling and personal story about Ismaili Muslim women. The author begins with the story of Farida—who in 1971 had to flee East Pakistan. Already an ultra-poor family, the displacement added additional pressures to Farida's family, which were relieved by the support that they received from fellow Ismailis in Karachi (West Pakistan). We learn that Farida later migrated to the United States and extended the same support to Afghan refugees who were fleeing the Taliban. The author later reveals that Farida is her mother—a revelation that is not only heartwarming, but also a literary genius. What a beautiful way to introduce readers to the author, her relationship with her community, and the history of Ismailis.

The book's innovation also lies in its research methods and Khoja-Moolji's approach towards her interlocutors. We understand that historical records are not only passed down from generation to generation, but also manifest in the form of personal histories and memory. Specifically, in having conversations with her interlocuters, Khoja-Moolji treats their memories "not as repositories of facts, but as active processes of creating meaning" (p.33). I find this approach to be particularly fascinating and immensely valuable in studies focusing on personal histories, given as these histories, when passed down intergenerationally, have the potential to take on new meaning when relayed in a different context. This is evident in Chapter 6, which focuses on second-generation Ismaili Muslims who grew up in North America. I focus my review on this chapter to detail Khoja-Moolji's theorization of migrant placemaking.

In this chapter, Khoja-Moolji focuses on understanding and analyzing the ways in which those in the second generation engage in processes of placemaking, by thinking about and questioning their communal past and communal narratives in relation to their own personal experiences of anti-Black, anti-Brown, and anti-Muslim racism in the United States and Canada. For migration scholars in particular, this chapter is incredibly relevant to understanding how second-generation Muslims articulate an understanding of self and community in relation to racialized, gendered, and religious politics of the 21st century.

Khoja-Moolji describes how many of the second-generation women she interviewed share some similarities and differences with the first generation (the migrant/refugee generation) on community practices and approaches to placemaking. The difference between first- and second-generation experiences with racialized societies, lies mainly in two factors: first, the aspirations for assimilation in the first generation's experiences, which were reified through framing themselves and their community as the model minority; and second, the experiences of anti-Brown, anti-Black, and anti-Muslim racism that emerge because of the political environments in which the second generation grew up. While both cohorts are dealing with a similar issue, i.e. anti-immigrant and racist sentiments from the public and state, their approach to navigating this problem differs because of their host society, and social and economic precarity.

With regards to the first generation, Khoja-Moolji describes how Canadian immigration policies and placement of "refugee status" as part of their exclusionary tactics prompted first-generation Ismailis to construct and mobilize narratives of the model minority and grateful refugee as part of their effort to assimilate and convey to the state that they have successfully integrated in Canadian life. Consequently, in this cohort, there is less focus on publicly articulating one's struggle with structural forms of inequality including racism, employment discrimination, and communal marginalization.

Khoja-Moolji, however, situates these practices within the migrant/refugee generation's precarity. One of the things that really stuck out to me in Khoja-Moolji's analysis is the concept of "sanitized stories" and how integral they can be in "surviving racialization" (p.184-185). It resonates with my own work in which I have discovered that Muslim women encounter and survive their racialization not only through sanitized stories but also through renegotiating embodiment practices. I examine how taking off the hijab can sometimes be a strategy that helps Muslim women survive their racialization by non-Muslims and non-Muslim states. Khoja-Moolji helps us to think further about the many different ways in which racialized groups work to survive their racialization through shifting and renegotiating expectations, performances of the self, narratives, and interpersonal encounters as well.

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This is also where the second generation come in. Specifically, Khoja-Moolji shows that the second generation critique the model minority practices of the migrant/refugee generation by questioning but also empathizing with them. They note that narratives of the model minority strengthen rather than dismantle racial and class hierarchies that are bound to anti-Black racism and white supremacy. Khoja-Moolji adeptly offers examples of these critiques in religious curricula used in Ismaili Sunday schools. We thus concretely observe how the second generation's ethical subjectivities are informed by their sociopolitical contexts.

I have focused my review one chapter in order to delineate in detail how Khoja-Moolji's work can enhance our understanding of migrant placement across generations and at the same time discover ethics as a fluid project that is always-in-the-making. We further understand cultural memory as something that not only has its own coherence as it is passed down from one generation to the next, but that it also evolves and is shaped by moments and contexts. *Rebuilding Community* is a beautifully warm, well-written, and candid text on Ismaili women's practices of placemaking, meaning making, and ethical subjectivities.

Commentary 4—Mariam Durrani, American University

Rebuilding Community is a unique, ambitious, and brilliant book. The writing is crisp, and I could not help but get completely immersed in the intimate stories of Ismaili Muslim women. While the book has much to offer us in terms of feminist approaches to migration, spirituality, and emplacement after displacement, the two interventions I want to emphasize are: Khoja-Moolji's insistence that we value women's care work not through productivist logics but by understanding its role in refugee placemaking; and her theorization of the culinary dimension of this placemaking.

Khoja-Moolji offers a sophisticated analytical approach that centers and highlights the care work of Ismaili women—a form of care that is undervalued and often invisibilized in mainstream renderings of Ismaili communities. Khoja-Moolji is careful to remind us that her attention to women *does not mean* that men do not do care work: in fact, they do, and they participate in very particular gendered capacities and roles within broader constellations of care work. Rather, the point Khoja-Moolji makes is that women's care work is a quotidian, everyday form of life-giving, life-affirming action through which Ismaili communities have sustained themselves through multiple moments of displacement and emplacement. While many focus on the public spheres of men—as "pioneers" and as "leaders" who migrated and benefitted from business opportunities elsewhere—Khoja-Moolji's strong feminist scholarship focuses our attention to multiple expressions of *ethics of care* that are produced as women are "producing sociability, repairing past trauma, and furnishing continuity from one generation to the next" (p.9).

Indeed, Khoja-Moolji crucially points to the fact that such continuity is even more essential for communities who have been displaced and forced to migrate. In the case of Ismailis who have migrated across the Indian Ocean world, a diasporic breadth makes the connectivity of women's care work all the more essential. Indeed, when I was reading, I found myself thinking about how Khoja-Moolji's work tells us so much about how women, especially those on the margins, create homes, produce stability, and nurture one another even in the midst of crisis, movement, and encounter with places/spaces that may be hostile to their very existence. In this historical moment, it seems critical to study how cultural practices are shaped by forced

displacement that renders traditional sedentarist forms of care and community making untenable, if not impossible.

Khoja-Moolji asks us to try to move beyond a simplistic Marxist analysis that sees all forms of work, even care work, only through the rubrics of productivity. As she states, while there may be a utilitarian value to the work women do, her book's argument is to emphasize "non-productive logics"—joy, for example—that does something far more essential than merely contributing some labor value to a community. Khoja-Moolji's method of feminist analysis proves especially important and critical to this analysis. She draws from the esteemed decolonial feminist scholar Maria Lugones to enact a form of "faithful witnessing" (p.31). To be a faithful witness is to take seriously the care work done in intimate spaces and everyday practices—to listen carefully to how women understand their own care work without already imposing particular meanings onto them.

And crucially, through her use of "faithful witnessing" Khoja-Moolji explains that it is about *faith*. Indeed, the story Khoja-Moolji wants to tell about Ismaili communities has to do with the particularities of their Muslim Shia spirituality and the way the work of *seva* and *khidmat* is the work of spiritual community-making through the Ismaili *jamatkhana* or community house. Khoja-Moolji's work offers an important critique of the white Marxist feminism that does not see spiritual practice and community building as an essential part of social reproductive work.

Given my own work, I found Khoja-Moolji's discussion of "Culinary Placemaking" in Chapter 5 especially enjoyable. She reminds us in this chapter that "[f]ood and cooking are recurring motifs in the lives of displaced people and migrants" (p.142). My mouth watered as I read Khoja-Moolji's stories of *bhel puri* and *khichiri*, reminding me that food emplaces us by linking our senses to places of nostalgia, not as of the past, but as of the present. Khoja-Moolji wants us to see these food practices as continuity, as a way that people who have moved still *inherit* and inhabit their pasts. In this sense, making food, eating food, smelling food, remembering those meals, is an act of ethical life-affirming care work.

The cookbook, as Khoja-Moolji beautifully illustrates, is an essential component of all of this: it provides history, the ability to travel in time and space, and to feel at home wherever one

may live physically. Here, I appreciated the tension that Khoja-Moolji opens up regarding coloniality and food-based community practices. On the one hand, nostalgia for home can seem as if it may somehow be outside of historical power relations. Yet, Khoja-Moolji reminds us that the value of the cookbook is in placing us *in history.* For example, in one of the books considered in the chapter—*The Settler's Cookbook*—Khoja-Moolji explains that the tensions of migration are not just about loss of homeland, but also about the British colonial legacies that forced people from their homelands and produced the conditions for the kinds of racism experienced by Black Ugandans from Asians, including Ismailis.

Finally, Khoja-Moolji reminds us that food plays an essential role in religious life in the diaspora. Oftentimes when we think of religious ceremonies and rituals, we get caught in an overemphasis on spiritual texts, prayers, and the like. These spheres, not surprisingly, have often been the sole purview of men in communities and of scholars studying religious communities. And yet, what we do most often when we join in community religiosity is that we eat. And we eat A LOT. When we are in crisis, when we are shedding tears, when we feel pain, eating in community and finding nourishment in community can provide the spiritual anchor needed to make sense of this excruciating historical moment.

Author's Response—Shenila Khoja-Moolji, Georgetown University

I am grateful to Shehnaz Haqqani, Shruti Devgan, Inaash Islam, and Mariam Durrani for their thoughtful responses to my book, *Rebuilding Community: Displaced Women and the Making of a Shia Ismaili Muslim Sociality.* I also thank Andrew Kent, the managing editor of *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography*, for selecting the book for this forum. It is a privilege to have one's work read so deeply. As is often the case, new possibilities for thought and action emerge in/through such attention, and that is precisely what we can observe in this book forum too.

Several respondents noted that *Rebuilding Community*'s rearticulation of care work through non-productivist logics was salient for them. Mariam Durrani, for example, found Chapter 5 ("Culinary Placemaking") to illuminate the importance of such work for community formation. And Shehnaz Haqqani viewed this emphasis as crucial for uncovering women's influence within religious communities. As I have noted, often women's placemaking activities take the form of reproductive tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and washing. Even though such work is necessary for the propagation of society, it is frequently viewed as a property of women's biology and is therefore under-valued. Marxist feminists have therefore regarded housework as a paradigmatic site for gendered exploitation, and have sought to elevate its value by moving it into the realm of waged labor. I instead align with those feminist and religious studies scholars who refuse to reduce women's work to productivist logics. I mobilize a different logic altogether, viewing women's reproductive activities as producing relationality and sociability, repairing past trauma, functioning as a means of harnessing spirituality, and furnishing intergenerational continuity. The challenge for me then is to emphasize the salience of this work, and those who undertake it, while also pointing out the circumstances and scenarios when it becomes a site of exploitation.

I was also particularly pleased with how the respondents saw resonances between their own and my work, signaling the book's interdisciplinary reach. Shruti Devgan, for instance, noted that the terminology of *seva* (or service) is also used by her Sikh interlocutors—showing us how ethical vocabularies are shared even if practitioners subscribe to different religious traditions. Devgan's recall of the 1984 massacre of Sikhs and how second-generation Sikhs are recalling that history through fragments, also resonates with the experiences of Ismailis who fled

East Pakistan and East Africa in the 1970s and a second generation that is remembering that episode. Inaash Islam sees in this memory work a form of migrant placemaking that she found useful to think with. Islam's reflections situate *Rebuilding Community* within the emerging scholarship on American Muslims, which, as she notes, has tended to focus on the migrant generation. The book's reach to the second generation not only bridges the generations but also illustrates continuities and transformations.

Islamic Studies scholars, Haqqani and Islam, also appreciated the book's effort of archiving the lives of women from a minority Muslim group. Shia Muslims are a historical religious minority. They emerged from a succession crisis following the death of Prophet Muhammad, when one group of the Prophet's followers allied behind his friend Abu Bakr (they would eventually be known as the People of the Sunna and the Community, or Sunni) and a smaller group sided with his son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib (and would consolidate over time into the Party of Ali, or Shia). The Shia over time split into further groups as divisions developed over rightful successors. My interlocutors belong to the Nizari Ismaili group of Shias, who today are estimated to be between 12 and 15 million in number and spread globally. Their present Imam or spiritual leader is the 49th Imam in direct succession from the Prophet. When the history of Ismailis is written, it is often from the perspective of the Imams, the missionaries, or elite men. While these histories have accomplished the crucial task of clarifying the broad sequence of events defining Ismaili history, I have tried to add new dimensions to it through a partial reconstruction of Ismaili women's lives.

As the respondents observed, my hope for this book is to furnish both specific insights about the case (Shia Ismaili Muslims) and to offer broader conceptualizations for how we theorize placemaking, care work, and spiritualized socialities. In this respect, I also note that there is an ongoingness and ordinariness to women's ethical conduct that extends beyond current analyses of Muslim charity and religiosity, which are dominated by "the hegemonic paradigm of self-cultivation", as Amira Mittermaier (2012: 249) has argued. Ismailis practice their *din* (faith) both by working on their selves *and* by working intersubjectively to create community. Of course, such modes of religious intersubjectivity are not distinct to Ismailis; Muslims globally engage in ethical community-making. But unlike other Muslim groups, within Ismailis, the

Imam acts as a centripetal force that gives this community a distinct route to ethical action. Identifying an Ismaili ethics of care is not to argue that the community's particular understanding of spiritual obligation, homed in the diaspora, is wholly distinct from modes of care developed in other communities. It is rather, a close examination of *one* manner of living a Muslim life in which members of other communities—or the scholars who study them—may identify points of commonality as well as difference.

I again thank my inspiring interlocutors for their generous engagement with *Rebuilding Community.*

Reference

Mittermaier A (2012) Dreams from Elsewhere: Muslim subjectivities beyond the trope of self-cultivation. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18(2):247-265