

## Islam and Higher Education: Concepts, Challenges and Opportunities

DECOUPLING education from an apparently singular agenda of developing human resources with which to drive or revive an economy, a growing body of literature asserts instead the need to relate learning back to society. In line with this reasoning, Muborakshoeva explores notion(s) of higher education in Muslim contexts. The main concern of her book is the conceptualization of 'university' and its accompanying challenges and possibilities in broader Muslim environments, particularly in a 'self-declared Islamic Republic' (Pakistan) (p. 4). To do so, Muborakshoeva considers her observations and conversations at Pakistan universities, but draws primarily from elite interviews conducted with academics in the UK and Pakistan. As she appropriately notes, in light of scarce literature on this area of research, her study acts as a space within which to hear Muslim academics reconstruct and reflect on the idea of a university within a Muslim heritage.

The book is set out over six chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion), which divide the author's argument along two main themes. The first three chapters draw from a combination of historical literature and interviews with academics of Muslim contexts based in the UK (as the country of the author's host institution). The chapters contrast intellectual debates and socio-economic conditions within which higher education took root in the 'medieval' and post-WWII European and Muslim societies to revisit key concepts often assumed as generalizable across space and time. For instance, knowledge for Muslims in the Middle Ages was pluralistic, but always contained within a framework of the divine.

The author also problematizes the misleading division of learning into traditional and modern periods. Cautious

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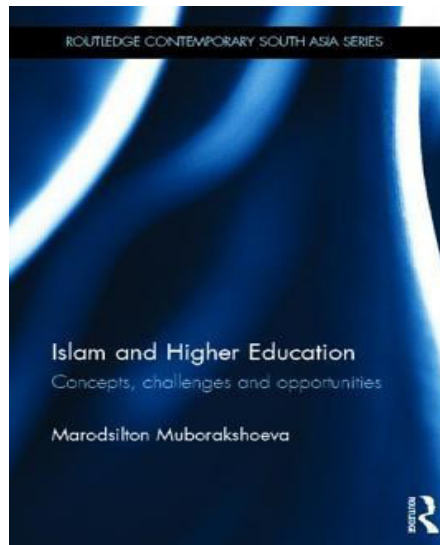
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of her own approach, she nevertheless uses the same categories but anchors them in the before and after of colonialism: European colonialism in Muslim areas fundamentally altered 'medieval' and 'modern' Muslims' philosophical approaches to the nature, form and purpose of higher learning. Thus, while 'traditional' learning was 'rooted in

societies prior to the influence ... of Europe or of the West' and retained space for divine alongside human thought (p. 7), the arrival of imperialism in the shape of colonial rulers brought with it a conflation of Western economic success with that of a 'useful' education system.

The book argues that whereas European society and economy developed first, giving rise to a space within which to further knowledge by reflecting on society and economy (a university), the alleged intellectual stagnation in Muslim societies allowed colonial values for useful education to supplant extant religious and cultural norms. Consequently, universities in Muslim contexts today perpetuate imported, rather than organic, knowledge systems. Having never genuinely resumed dialogue over theology and its place in contemporary ideas of humanity—owing to the placement of this very debate at the periphery of the colonial project itself due to its perceived irrelevance in the rise of industrial society (pp. 27, 33)—Muslim actors in higher education today still struggle indigenously to mediate, hence reconcile, tradition and modernity using the university.

In the case of Pakistan, a post-colonial 'Islamic' state picked up by the author to contextualize this argument, the last three chapters consider specific ideas and challenges of university education. Adopting a case-by-case approach of seven universities across the country, the author seeks to overcome the limited insight that existing literature offers to dilemmas and triumphs of university education in not just the Muslim world, but Pakistan particularly. Combining case context with the thoughts of Pakistani academics at various institutions (a full list of which can be found in the appendix), the fourth and fifth chapters

piece together a range of reflections and observations on how universities look (or should look) in Pakistan. Perhaps echoing the country's populous diversity, mixed views on state interference in higher education and varying demands of the market, the Pakistani universities are categorized along public (state)/private, religious/non-religious, elite/non-elite, and franchised/private-for-profit/private-not-for-profit lines, while noting that many universities intersect with more than one of these binaries (pp. 83–4).

As her empirical work indicates, most Pakistani universities cater predominantly to localized interpretations of a global neo-liberal economic narrative for higher education. Yet ideological battles over national aspirations and goals persist and it is within these localized contentions that the author develops her Pakistan-specific impressions of higher education. She finds, for instance, that religious institutions (primarily madrasas offering higher degrees) operate from a defensive position: equating globalized capital and market forces in education with a Westernization of ideas that will repeat colonial tendencies and compromise the Muslim Pakistani self, religious scholars leading seminaries hold on instead to what they firmly know—traditional knowledge, no matter when last opened for question or debate.

Interestingly, a number of non-religious institutional academics in Pakistan posit the hypothesis that most religious institutions avoid Western ideas for fear of being dragged into a 'jihad' matrix that has maligned madrasas in Pakistan for over a decade, becoming in the process stagnant and accustomed to their 'own' guarded ways. However, the book itself does not draw from testimonials of instructors (or even students) at madrasas to check for some truth to such perceptions about them from the 'outside', nor does it refer the reader to very recent literature that qualitatively investigates the madrasa as an intersection for education, religion, politics and the market.

Many of the issues in higher education identified among Pakistani universities parallel those that are of concern across Muslim contexts, including constraints on academic freedom from both state and religious parties/groups, the contentious position and promotion of women and the epistemological assumptions that determine the nature and communication of knowledge. Yet others seem particular to Pakistan: high levels of linguistic variation and an inaccessibility to written and academic Urdu for a majority of the population; a significantly low level of even basic literacy (about 55%), especially among women and those who reside in rural parts of the country.

While the book conducts a reasonably balanced analysis of the issues noted above, it falters in other ways. It is weak on voices of other stakeholders in higher education in Pakistan—students especially, but also the Higher Education Commission (HEC), a government body, which has undeniably changed the landscape of Higher Education in Pakistan, whether for better or worse. Where the HEC is discussed, it is indirectly through the opinions of other academics—while this is not to disregard the value of their opinions, it leaves a key area of higher education decision-making in Pakistan unattended and the reader unable to build a wider picture of tertiary learning beyond the positions adopted by academics chosen to be interviewed for this study. Additionally, when writing about her chosen cases, the author tends to toe established norms for particular universities. While opening up a closed world for the novice reader on Pakistani higher education, it overlooks nuanced contradictions and surprises in several cases.

For the period of her study, the Punjab University's (PU) College of Art and Design (mentioned in the book as the Institute of Art and Design) could have served as an important point of departure from the more general impression there exists of a strictly

gender-segregated, religious party-student politics environment at PU. Although the Aga Khan University, especially its medical college, is indeed set up with noble intentions (and respectable outcomes), the author skips over some pressing and obvious class issues that work their way into its educational structure(s). Lahore University of Management Sciences, while admittedly one of the country's better universities, is presented from the singular perspective of always hosting a critical, analytical and innovative campus ethos. It overlooks disappointments in recent decades such as curricular replication (coursework transferred from Western universities where faculty has studied or from where instructors visit frequently), which does not contribute productively to the modernity–tradition debate according to many who study and teach there, and, reflecting the country's wider evolving social structure, growing tensions on campus among students following religiously-inclined professors and those who do not.

Muborakshoeva acknowledges some of these limitations in her conclusion. Constrained by time, access and resources, she could only learn so much about such an underexplored area, especially in Pakistan. Nevertheless, in a field as vast as Higher Education where for decades insufficient attention has been given to knowledge narratives that deviate from the 'economy', a book that explores Muslim universities as a part of, not aside from, historical peaks and dips in social discourse and intellectualism is a significant contribution. Through everyday structures, aspirations, persons and roadblocks the author notes that while universities in Muslim contexts are not yet 'great contributors to the socio-cultural and civilisational advance of societ[y]' (p. 36) as universities are in the European/Western world, they certainly represent a diverse array of attempts to weave Islam into modern pedagogic discourse.\*

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