

A Review of *The Impossibility of Innocence: Muslim Boyhood Under Surveillance* by Shenila Khoja-Moolji

Shenila Khoja-Moolji'nin *Masumiyetin İmkânsızlığı: Gözetim Altındaki Müslüman Erkek Çocukluğu* Adlı Eserinin Değerlendirilmesi

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Abstract

This review discusses *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood* by Shenila Khoja-Moolji, a critical contribution to studies of race, gender, and Islamophobia. The book interrogates how Muslim boys in the United States are systematically racialized, denied childhood innocence, and framed as future security threats. Drawing on critical race theory, postcolonial studies, and gender theory, Khoja-Moolji situates these experiences within a broader ideological framework of carceral control and racial capitalism. Through detailed case studies, media analysis, and interviews, the author reveals how Muslim boys are not only criminalized but also commodified in ways that serve both state security agendas and capitalist interests. The book also expands its lens globally by comparing the U.S. context to Hindutva discourses in India, highlighting the transnational dynamics of Islamophobia. Overall, *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood* presents a compelling and well-theorized account of how fear, surveillance, and systemic exclusion shape the lived experiences of Muslim boys in both national and global contexts.

Keywords: Masculinity, Boyhood, Racialization, Surveillance, Islamophobia.

Öz

Bu değerlendirme, Shenila Khoja-Moolji'nin *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood (Müslüman Erkek Çocukluğunun İmkânsızlığı)* adlı eserini ele almaktadır. Irk, toplumsal cinsiyet ve İslamofobi çalışmalarına önemli bir katkı sunan kitap, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde Müslüman erkek çocukların sistematik olarak ırksallaştırılmasını, çocukluk masumiyetinden mahrum bırakılmasını ve gelecekteki güvenlik tehditleri olarak konumlandırılmalarını sorgulamaktadır. Khoja-Moolji, eleştirel ırk kuramı, post-kolonyal çalışmalar ve toplumsal cinsiyet teorisinden yararlanarak bu deneyimleri gözetim ve disiplin mekanizmalarının hâkim olduğu ceza rejimi ve ırksal kapitalizmden oluşan daha geniş bir ideolojik çerçeve içinde konumlandırmaktadır. Yazar, detaylı vaka analizleri, medya incelemeleri ve derinlemesine mülakatlar yoluyla, Müslüman erkek çocukların yalnızca kriminalize edilmediğini, aynı zamanda devletin güvenlik politikalarına ve kapitalist çıkarlara hizmet edecek şekilde metalaştırıldığını da ortaya koymaktadır. Kitap ayrıca analizini küresel bir boyuta taşıyarak, Amerika bağlamını Hindistan'daki Hindutva söylemleriyle karşılaştırmakta ve İslamofobinin ulusötesi dinamiklerini gözler önüne sermektedir. Genel olarak, *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood*, korku, gözetim ve sistematik dışlanmanın Müslüman erkek çocukların ulusal ve küresel düzeydeki deneyimlerini nasıl şekillendirdiğine dair güçlü ve kuramsal temelli bir anlatı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erkeklik, Erkek çocukluk, Irksallaştırma, Gözetim, İslamofobi.

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Shenila Khoja-Moolji's recent book *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood* critically examines how Muslim boys are racialized, disciplined, and constructed as security threats within the United States. Drawing on critical race theory, gender studies, and postcolonial thought, the book situates the experiences of and the perceptions towards Muslim boys within a "broader ideological project" of surveillance, carceral control, and global warfare capitalism (p. 3). While the study focuses primarily on the US context, Khoja-Moolji also engages with global parallels, specifically the Hindu nationalist framing of Muslim boys as threats in India. Khoja-Moolji argues that Muslim boys in the US are systematically racialized and denied childhood innocence, being instead framed as potential future threats to national security. The book challenges the assumption that childhood is universally associated with innocence, playfulness, and protection, demonstrating that for Muslim boys, this status is often withheld due to their racial and religious identity.

She anchors her argument in two pivotal case studies that reveal how Muslim boys are racialized within the American security state: the detainment of the 5-year-old boy in the US border because of his possible threat to US security right after Donald Trump's executive order for banning the refugee entries from Muslim majority countries and arrestment of 14-year-old boy in a school because of the false notice by his teacher that he carries a bomb seemed like a digital clock. Through these incidents, the author argues that Muslim boys are not merely perceived as children but as imaginative threats, disproportionately feared compared to their white counterparts of the same age. Though these cases may seem irrational, extraordinary, or exceptional, Khoja-Moolji reveals the underlying rational and ideological construct, situating them "broader ideological project that seeks to make future crime visible today, so it can be managed and eradicated through a sprawling carceral state" (p. 3).

Methodologically integrating media discourse analysis, case study research, and qualitative interviews, the author examines how Muslim boys are systematically framed as threats. She analyzes news coverage, social media discourse, and legal proceedings to capture public perceptions and institutional responses. Additionally, her study draws on focus group interviews conducted in 2017, where young Muslim boys shared their lived experiences, providing firsthand insights into how they navigate

racialization, surveillance, and systemic suspicion. Through this nuanced analysis, *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood* contributes to ongoing debates on Islamophobia, securitization, and racial capitalism, offering a compelling critique of how the figure of the Muslim boy is shaped by fear, suspicion, and systemic exclusion. Based on a thematic and conceptual organization, the book consists of four chapters, each built upon key theoretical and analytical frameworks to explore different dimensions of how Muslim boyhood is racialized, disciplined, and instrumentalized within security and capitalist structures, and how these are globally connected experiences. By doing so, the book presents a cohesive argument, with each chapter contributing to a broader understanding of the subject.

In the first chapter “Muslim Boyhood in America,” drawing on some key theoretical frameworks, Khoja-Moolji explores how the concept of child innocence has been reconstructed throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, with particular attention to Muslim boys in America and the ways this reconstruction operates through interconnected regimes of race and religion. She engages with Miriam Ticktin’s argument that the political imagination of innocence is shaped by the search for a “space of purity”, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion that impurity is imposed by systems of domination. Additionally, she incorporates Cedric Robinson’s theory of racialization as a means of naturalizing capitalist inequalities, showing how Muslim boys are subjected to structural surveillance and suspicion. Using Stuart Hall’s concept of “ideological displacement”, Khoja-Moolji argues that public and state responses to Muslim boys—such as disproportionate policing and surveillance—are shaped by historical traumas and future anxieties about US national security. These anxieties, rather than being directed at systemic causes, are displaced onto young Muslim boys, who are constructed as “proto-terrorists”. The chapter also explores how Islamophobia operates as a connective regime, where cultural markers like veils, Muslim-sounding names, or beards function as racial signifiers, effectively replacing skin color as indicators of racial difference. Through this process, innocence itself becomes socially constructed—while white childhood is protected and presumed innocent, Muslim boys are positioned as inherently suspect, reinforcing their exclusion from the category of childhood itself.

In the second chapter “Constructing the Proto-Terrorist”, Khoja-Moolji examines how Muslim boys are racialized as future security threats. Through the case of Rezwan Kohistani, an Afghan refugee teenager found hanging from a tree in a predominantly white town, under unclear circumstances; Khoja-Moolji situates this racialization within American imperialism, racial capitalism, and the securitization of Muslim identities. She argues that US warfare capitalism has reshaped domestic perceptions of risk, linking Afghan refugees to security fears. Rather than acknowledging state responsibility for war-induced displacement, public resentment is redirected onto racialized individuals like Rezwan. Tracing securitization from military operations abroad to domestic policing and school surveillance, she highlights how Muslim boys, like Black youth, face systemic exclusion— manifesting as policing, school suspensions, and public suspicion rather than mass incarceration. This fear-based governance serves to justify militarization while deflecting attention from state violence and capitalist exploitation. As Khoja-Moolji argues, Muslim boys become ideological tools to sustain racial capitalism and suppress cross-racial solidarity.

In the third chapter “Instrumentalization and Commercialization”, Khoja-Moolji examines how the racialization of Muslim boys as “proto-terrorists” is not only a mechanism of state surveillance but also a tool for security expansion and capitalist exploitation. A key aspect of this process is the commercialization of anti-racism, in which the incidents of racial discrimination against Muslim boys are strategically instrumentalized rather than genuinely addressed. For instance, when a Muslim boy experiences harassment or wrongful criminalization, he may be publicly embraced by politicians, invited to the White House, or featured in media campaigns—not to dismantle systemic Islamophobia, but to create an illusion of inclusivity while leaving structural inequalities intact. In this way, Islamophobia is not merely oppressive but also profitable, as corporations, media outlets, and political figures commodify terrorism narratives for their own interests. Through this analysis, the author successfully demonstrates that Muslim boyhood is not only criminalized but also commodified, reinforcing systems of control that serve both state security agendas and capitalist accumulation.

In the final chapter “Whiteness, Hindutva, and Impurity” Khoja-Moolji expands her analysis globally, comparing the US securitization of Muslim boys as “proto-terrorists” with Hindutva narratives in India that frame them as threats to cultural and religious purity. Despite contextual differences, both frameworks function to marginalize, surveil, and restrict Muslim boys through fear-based discipline. She further explores how Muslim boys themselves experience and navigate racialization, drawing on focus group interviews to highlight their strategies of self-surveillance, behavioral adjustments, and emotional resilience. By integrating personal narratives, Khoja-Moolji demonstrates that Muslim boyhood is shaped by both institutional constraints and the daily burden of being seen as a threat. This chapter ultimately reveals the transnational nature of Islamophobia and how racialized fear, whether rooted in security or nationalist discourses, limits the freedoms and agency of Muslim boys across different contexts.

One of the key strengths of *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood* is Khoja-Moolji’s rejection of an essentialized definition of Muslim boyhood. Instead, she frames it as a “heuristic device”, allowing for a more flexible and intersectional analysis of how American racial capitalism constructs threat (p.7). This approach enables her to avoid overgeneralization and focus on the structural forces shaping Muslim boys’ experiences. Additionally, her work fills a critical gap in scholarship by shifting attention from dominant narratives of Islamophobia and gender. While studies on gendered Islamophobia have largely focused on Muslim women’s experiences—such as hijab, repression, and discrimination (Abu Khalaf et al., 2022; Faury, 2024; Navarro, 2010; Perry, 2013) —research on Muslim men tends to center on radicalization, terrorism, and patriarchy, predominantly examining adult subjects (Dwyer et al., 2008; Hopkins 2004, Hopkins 2007; Treadwell & Garland, 2011). Khoja-Moolji’s work addresses a critical gap by examining the racialization of Muslim boys, an often-overlooked dimension in this discourse. Her concept of “Muslim boyhood” not only highlights the lived experiences of Muslim boys but also problematizes the very notion of “innocence”, opening a new avenue in the study of Muslim masculinity.

Moreover, while her analysis primarily focuses on US security and racial politics, her comparative engagement with Hindutva in India demonstrates the adaptability of her framework. By applying her analysis beyond the American context, Khoja-Moolji shows the global dimensions of Islamophobia and how different ideological regimes construct Muslim boys as threats. This strengthens the book's theoretical reach, making it applicable to broader discussions of race, security, and masculinity. However, while her decision to treat "Muslim boyhood" as an analytical tool is effective, it also leaves some unanswered questions. The book could benefit from greater clarity on the boundaries of this category—for example, what age range is included in Muslim boyhood? How do non-binary Muslim youth fit within this framework? How do socio-economic status and geography shape these experiences differently? Addressing these dimensions more explicitly would have further refined her argument.

Overall, *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood* offers a compelling and innovative contribution to the study of race, Islamophobia, and security. Despite minor ambiguities in defining its key concept, the book's rigorous analysis, theoretical adaptability, and focus on an overlooked subject make it a valuable resource for scholars of racialization, gender studies, and global security politics. Furthermore, *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood* has become even more relevant in Trump's new presidency, a period marked by increased detentions, visa cancellations, and deportations of Muslim students, as well as the framing of Palestinian and pro-Palestinian students as threats. With its strong academic grounding, it is essential for graduate students and an urgent read for policymakers navigating today's complex landscape.

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