shaping and reshaping itself, did indeed help the editors to format the history of the Portuguese sea-borne empire with a difference. To all serious scholars and students of European expansion, this is a book that I would readily recommend.

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Mahua Sarkar, Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal (2008), xi + 338 (Duke University Press, Durham, $84.95, paperback $23.95).

This is an ambitious project that situates the production of Muslim womanhood within an intellectual history of nationalist and reformist debates of the late nineteenth century and then tracks these contexts to the twentieth century through carefully chosen ethnographies of Muslim women in Bengal and Bangladesh. Spanning the period from the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth century, the book covers a great deal of ground in following the diverse ways in which Muslim women were constituted as subjects and actors at particular historical moments: by colonial and nationalist reformers, by ‘official’ histories, and finally by themselves in oral interviews with the author. She argues that the lack of scholarship on Muslim women is not accidental, but constitutive and often the ground on which hegemonic narratives, such as the ideals of feminism and middle-class Indian womanhood, have been authorized – hence the ‘disappearing women’ of her title. By engaging with existing scholarship, Sarkar draws eclectically on a range of disciplines: sociology, anthropology, history, feminist and gender studies. The book represents historical sociology at its cutting edge by bringing intellectual history into the post-colonial present.

The strongest parts of the book are chapters three and four, because of the originality of her archival and ethnographic research. Sarkar has scoured a large number of periodicals written by and for a Muslim intelligentsia in north India and Bengal in order to revisit some of the debates in which Muslim women and men engaged at the turn of the twentieth century. This was a momentous period for the emergence of both Indian nationalism and the constitution of women as particular types of figures for middle-class nationalists. Sarkar carefully shows how Muslims and Muslim women became an unmarked other against which nationalist, and putatively Hindu, distinctions were made about who could be counted as Indian. She revisits the work of Rokeya Hussain and situates it among that of other Muslim women and men who were writing in this period. She demonstrates that there was no such thing as ‘Muslim thought’, but rather a series of debates that showed the vibrancy of an intellectual community that was attempting to locate itself within the emergent Indian nation. Her treatment of Hussain, whose work has often been analysed, is new and original, largely because it tracks some of the ways in which her ideas developed over several decades in conversation with other intellectuals and Muslim women thinkers. Sarkar argues that the urban ashraf classes were distinct from rural Muslims and that they produced a third group in the 1920s and 1930s – a reform-minded Bengali Muslim intelligentsia. This differentiation is crucial for understanding the ways in which Muslims were inextricably a part of civil society in Bengal at the turn of the
twentieth century, imagining themselves as both Muslim and as a Bengali-speaking community. This sense of belonging gestures to the ways in which Muslims continue to be integral to contemporary India (96–7).

In researching chapter four, Sarkar interviewed half a dozen Muslim middle-class women who live either in Kolkata or Dhaka and who were born in the early decades of the twentieth century. She argues here that oral histories and personal narratives are often structured through the shape of dominant historical narratives, and the fact that many of Sarkar’s informants focused on the events of the 1947 partition suggests that their own status changed when Bengal was divided and Muslims left Kolkata in large numbers for eastern Bengal. The author’s careful and sensitive analyses of these narratives are the highlight of the book, bringing out her very impressive analytical skills in situating these individual narratives within a larger historical narrative that stretches back into the nineteenth century. For instance, one of Sarkar’s subjects, Mumtaz, ‘forgets’ when the India–Pakistan war occurred and cites it alongside other Hindu–Muslim encounters in her life. Rather than dismissing the lack of clarity in Mumtaz’s narrative, Sarkar astutely observes that ‘the confusion over the dates of the war seems to indicate that the sporadic eruptions of Hindu–Muslim violence are conflated in her mind into a single, drawn-out experience of being suspected, mistrusted, and endangered in a Hindu-dominated society’ (156). The analysis in this chapter makes this the most gripping part of the book and, had she wished, these narratives and Sarkar’s own analysis might have comprised an entire book on its own.

Although Sarkar is critical of some existing feminist scholarship for over-emphasizing the feminist credentials of their subjects and for omitting a complex understanding of third-world and Muslim women, her book might well be situated within a genealogy of feminist scholarship on south Asia that is ongoing, thriving and unfinished. This book opens up many questions, particularly on the subject of Muslim women across the subcontinent. Sarkar modestly resists extending her analysis to Bangladesh because she feels this merits its own study (139), but the strength of her argument is that it moves discussions about women in post-colonial south Asia in a new direction, particularly in gesturing towards the ways in which Muslim women in India and in Bangladesh might have a shared intellectual and cultural legacy.

Her closing chapter, which revisits the Shah Bano controversy and the violence that affected Muslim women after the Gujarat pogroms in 2002, does not do justice to the richness of her larger argument or its potential impact. Her open-ended conclusion gestures to the sorts of material effects that occur when minority communities are not historically understood. Yet by focusing on a well-known ‘case’, and a category of unnamed women who were violated in the course of mob violence, her conclusion threatens to undermine her own insistence that the subjectivity of Muslim women should be understood in all its complexity, rather than flattened to a category or a case.

Sarkar resists calling hers a recuperative history, although in effect she has recuperated a history of Muslim women that gives them a past, and one hopes that her history offers some political legitimacy to Muslim women and their communities in post-colonial India and Bangladesh.

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