Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood

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Islamic education is strongly rooted in scholarship and scientific advancement. The madrasa system of schooling's long legacy of learning spans Muslim rule and civilization. Muslim women have been active in such Islamic education for centuries. For example, the University of Al-Qarawiyyīn in Fez, Morocco offers a unique existing and still operating model where religiosity, gender and education juxtapose to produce a great scholarly hub—from which the oldest documented medical degree award (*ijāza fī al-ṭibb*) in the world was granted in 1207 CE. (Fourtassi et al. 2020). This university, designated by UNESCO (2020) as "the oldest university in the world", was established with an associated madrasa by an educated Muslim woman, Fatima al-Fihrī, in 859 CE. It is documented that madrasas known as 'Dār al-Faqīha' [House of the Female Jurist] were led by women who had privileged access to the University of Al-Qarawiyyīn during its peak scholarship (Ahmed 2016).

Currently, however, madrasas are frequently associated with backwardness, indoctrination, extremism and subjugating women's educational aspirations. Empirical studies are needed to examine

madrasa education beyond existing shallow and partial stereotypes to produce deeper nuanced analyses of madrasas' heritage, contemporary struggles, and potential contributions.

Borker's work furthers this scholarly understanding by capturing facets of the complex educational role that madrasa schooling plays in the lives and careers of Muslim girls in India. She provides the reader with a rich, accessible, thought-provoking ethnographic analysis drawing on juxtapositions of gender, religion, and education, based on twelve months fieldwork. The book is divided into an introduction, seven main chapters detailing girls' madrasa education (their journeys, transitions, aspirations), and a concluding chapter weaving together different threads and offering policy reflections. A combination of insightful theoretical concepts, including "work on imagined communities, feminist and anthropological scholarship on women's piety, and Appadurai's (2013) concept of the 'capacity to aspire'" (3), capture the complexity of the girls' trajectories and choices beyond the rhetoric and stereotypes attributed to madrasas. Yet, an Islamic scholarly conceptual framework of reasoning remains at bay from this analysis. Moreover, some provided explanations of students' behaviour could be challenged, and some shared photos raise potential ethical concerns.

Two key arguments drive the book's narrative: firstly, the pious practices of *kamil momina* (in Urdu, an ideal, complete, or perfect Muslim woman: see page 3) are ambiguous; and secondly, the girls' aspirations change through an ongoing process of negotiation. Accordingly, the perceived "stereotypical conceptualization of madrasa education as a religio-cultural constraint on women" is problematized (268). She rails against policy makers' attempts to instrumentalise madrasas, whose cultivation of culture or religion serve other ends from the top-down and state-led madrasa modernisation approach. Instead, the author advocates a bottom-up approach by eliciting the multiple micro-processes at play in girls' madrasa education, including parental interests, *dini* (religious) and *duniyavi* (worldly) educational provision, and the peer networks developing within the madrasa. Borker argues that madrasa

education provides a perceived safe Muslim space of interaction and introduces girls to contentious notions of ideal Islamic womanhood, while it also provides the context within which unanticipated changes in the girls' aspirations and pious prescriptions are being shaped by the emerging opportunities and challenges in their everyday lives. Throughout the book, the author effectively examines how such a changing process contributes to "a changing imagination of gender in the wider community and the processes of future-making" (8).

Theoretical underpinnings are elucidated in the introduction. In the second chapter, Borker effectively contextualizes discourse on Islamic womanhood in its historical context of madrasas' development and the reformation attempts responding to colonial interests and agendas. She creatively questions conventional binaries between tradition and modernity and the notions of Islamic womanhood versus Western models of empowerment through resistance. Three ethnographic cases highlight legitimate questions about the dynamics of continuity and change in the educational and career paths of the female madrasa students. The divergent tensions arising are addressed in the third chapter. Offering a nuanced analysis, the fourth chapter contextualizes the girls' religious madrasa education within its larger spheres of influence. Included here are the socio-economic and political marginalization of Muslims in India; the rise of the right-wing Hindutva movement and its attendant increase on negative stereotyping of the Muslim minority; the 'vilification of madrasas' and the communalization of social space; and the influence of Islamic reform movements who seek to foster a vision of women's roles in reviving the idealized *umma*. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 examine the trajectories delineating the girls' practices of piety and change into their "imaginary of what constitutes an ideal Muslim woman" (268) across different transitions. The reflections and recommendations outlined in chapter 9 allow consideration of the identified junctures in the girls' education and employment "as potential points of policy intervention" (268) to further facilitate the access of madrasa students

and Muslim women into public spaces and to create pluralistic common spaces for women's participation.

As previously noted, I have three main issues with this text. First, the analysis of participants' accounts needs to take the core structures of their Islamic ontological and epistemological frameworks more seriously, if it is to examine their meanings in greater depth. Reappraising these frameworks would facilitate those ambivalent accounts towards a greater semblance of coherence regarding participants' self-aspirations, sense of belonging, human shortcomings, relationships with others, and priorities in life. It remains crucial to distinguish between the girls' direct readings of the key Islamic sources, Quran and Hadith, the various schools of Quranic interpretation, including theology and jurisprudence, and ideological interpretations of the perfect Muslim woman influenced by socio-political contexts. The conflation between the first two spheres and the latter ideological dimension confuses some analytical conclusions about the key concept of "ambivalent piety". Given a changing context, the strength of the girls' Islamic knowledge to devise (*ijtihād*) appropriate scholarly rulings that do not contradict their sense of 'piety' has not always been recognized in this research. The students' reference to *qismat* (destiny) and Allah's will (65-66) demonstrates how their theological understanding of *qadar* (fate) contributes to understanding their reality and negotiates future plans. Students' justifications do not regard sports and play as breaking the boundaries of piety based on religious reasoning when applying the main Islamic sources (201): "on their part, the girls would often defend themselves, saying, 'Quran *mein khelne pe manai nahi hai*' (Quran doesn't say, don't play), and look for any and every opportunity to indulge in such fun." The researcher also states: "many of the girls described 'gazing out' [without being seen by outsiders] as behaviour that was well within the bounds of piety" (202). Borker discusses in chapter six the 'role modelling' aspect in fashioning students' views on piety based on women in the Prophet's household. Some hadith madrasa curriculum textbooks contain narrations that challenge the madrasa

version of piety regarding such games as "*jangli* (wild and uncivilized) and not befitting well-mannered girls" (200). For example, it is narrated in various books that the Prophet raced with his wife Aisha (in *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* and *Sunan Nasā'ī*) and he also kept her behind him watching the Abyssinians players in the Mosque (in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*). Hence, the fashioning of new selves could emerge not by ambivalences, ideologies, and personal manipulation, but also through genuine spiritual experiences and applying active reflective scholarly avenues of religious reasoning (*ijtihād*), given the ongoing changing context ('*urf*). In this regard, I would ask whether participants reading this book would regret their participation in a study where their experiences, accounts, and choices were reduced to ideological factors, tactics, and clever manoeuvres.

Second, in chapter six, the author represents the girls' attempts to circumvent some madrasa restrictions, including feigning illness and jinn possession, which may have been deployed as exit strategies, as the author suggests. Ibn Khaldūn (2005) considers the suppressive discipline approach to instil *adab* (moral conduct) in learners as damaging to the learner's self-esteem and happiness which may encourage them to manipulate to avoid punishment. Yet, relying on manipulation as an explanation to counter the discipline surveillance of the madrasa is problematic. Given the pressures of leaving home, intensive studies, and adapting to the confined madrasa environment, some students may develop genuine mental health issues or eating disorders. An attribution of hallucinations or other psychotic symptoms to jinn (i.e., invisible spirits) appears to be quite common among patients with Muslim backgrounds (Dein and Illaiee 2013; Lim, Hoek, and Blom 2014).

Third, ethical guarantees with a stress on purdah may have been transgressed. Figure 6.3 (182) shows the girls' faces and necks, while figure 6.5 (183) shows the presenter's face and hair, even though they were in a trusted female-only space which may have entailed strict access conditions of not showing the girls' faces. These photos raise concerns over the nature of the subjects'

consent in the field. This may have serious implications for trust and future research access to these madrasas.

Such criticisms should not detract from the importance of this book for examining the education of Muslim girls in madrasa settings or broadly exploring the madrasa educational provision and its development within its local socio-political contexts. The book complements contributions including *Madrasas in the Age of Islamophobia* by Salam and Parvaiz (2020), especially the account therein (73-76) of some key trajectories, mindset changes, and contextual influences on girls' educational and employment choices across different transitions. Borker showcases and analyzes such situations ethnographically (Chapters 1, 3, and 8).

Regardless of the reader's personal values concerning gender and Islamic education, this balanced, extensive, and stimulating contribution proves valuable for undergraduate and postgraduate courses on Islamic education. For those specifically interested in examining girls' madrasa education, however, this book is a must read.

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