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Between Reproduction and Empowerment: A Critical Review of Hem Borker's *Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood*

Abdul Azeez T K
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Dr.R.M.L.S. College, Muzaffarpur

Abstract

Hem Borker's Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood (2018) provides an ethnographic study of girls' madrasas, focusing on Madrasa Jamiatul Mominat. Distancing herself from both the "reproductive" and "empowerment" frameworks, Borker explores piety, aspiration, and community formation in girls' educational journeys. Drawing on Appadurai's concept of the "capacity to aspire" and De Certeau's "everyday," she examines how students negotiate between religious ideals and modern aspirations. The study highlights how girls' religiosity and agency shift as they move from madrasa to university spaces. Borker engages with Saba Mahmood's notion of ethical agency but critiques its limitations in addressing socio-economic complexities. She situates madrasas as educational spaces beyond discourses of radicalization or reform. The work interrogates the paradox of education as both reinforcing and challenging gender norms. It also underscores the contingent nature of piety in everyday practices. While theoretically rich, the absence of textual analysis of madrasa curricula leaves a gap. Overall, the book is a nuanced contribution to scholarship on gender, education, and Islamic womanhood.

Keywords: Madrasas, Islamic Womanhood, Piety and Aspiration, Gender and Education, Everyday Practices

Hem Borker's *Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood* is a significant contribution to the study of madrasas, particularly those for girls. Combining a rich ethnography of Madrasa Jamiatul Mominat with an extensive survey of existing literature, the work is academically compelling. In the following pages, I will try to summarize the book's main arguments and along with a brief review.

The work identifies two dominant frameworks in the literature on madrasas—namely, the "reproductive" and "empowerment" models—and distances itself from both (Borker

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28). Scholars like Alam, Winkelmann, P. Jeffery, R. Jeffery, and C. Jeffery are categorized within the reproductive framework, as they argue in various ways that madrasas reproduce traditional norms in their students. In the second framework, scholars like M. Bano and other Muslim feminists underline the significance of women's access to religious scriptures as a source of empowerment (250). Borker subscribes to neither framework, instead positioning her analysis between the two. She critically explores concepts of community, piety, and aspiration by tracing different stages in the educational journeys of girls at Madrasa Jamiatul Mominat. Through substantial interviews with parents and madrasa authorities, she investigates how these groups conceptualize Islamic womanhood. Borker elaborates on how the aspirations of these girls change once they enter a university space like Jamia Millia Islamia, drawing on Appadurai's concept of the 'capacity to aspire' (8) and De Certeau's writings on the 'everyday,' which explore the tactics and dynamics of daily life.

Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood (2018) is a compelling study of girls' madrasas in India. Based on her fieldwork, Hem Borker examines how the notion of the ideal Islamic woman, as envisioned by both madrasa authorities and the students' parents, is imbibed by the students themselves. She explores how their religiosity is redefined by their changing 'capacity to aspire' (Borker 8). Borker problematizes the ethical framework of the madrasa and she also questions the liberatory potential of formal education for girls, particularly within madrasas.

She argues that scholarship on Muslim women has shown limited interest in questions of their education. The majority of the literature discusses religious identity markers like veiling, personal law, and purdah (37). The aforementioned frameworks of reproduction and empowerment focus on the religious and political role of the madrasa, addressing questions of radicalization and modernization. The author clearly states that this leads to a lack of sufficient attention to the madrasa's educational role. Her study, in contrast, pays close attention to the everyday experiences of the girls both inside and outside the madrasa.

Borker notes that nineteenth-century Muslim social reformers considered women's education central to preserving community identity, leading to the establishment of various institutional ventures outside the home (41). The Sachar Committee and other recent quantitative studies on girls' education underscore the feminization of madrasa enrolments (42). She lists reasons scholars provide for Muslim girls' choice of

madrasa, including a conservative value system, economic deprivation, the madrasa's flexibility as a community institution, the absence of adequate formal educational institutions, and marriage norms (43-44). Borker contends that these studies neglect the girls' experiential process and the connection between education and socio-cultural changes—a gap her study aims to fill.

She also invokes recent anthropological scholarship on gender and education, noting how the self-realizing narrative of education faces contingencies of gender, caste, and culture. For instance, Manuela Ciotti's (2006) study on Manupur Chamars reveals how education creates a tension with their inherent Dalit identity, which they then try to escape. Froerer's ethnography on Christian and Hindu Adivasis in Chhattisgarh underscores how landless Christian tribes were motivated to pursue higher studies to seek jobs elsewhere, while land-owning Hindu Adivasis saw only primary education as essential (43-44). Clarinda Still's 2011 study on Dalits in rural Nampally demonstrates how higher education can spoil a young Dalit woman's prospects of finding a suitable groom within her caste. Ritty Lukose's (2009) ethnography on college students in Kerala shows how class, caste, and gender shape different educational expectations.

According to the author, all these studies demonstrate that education is a negotiated space in the process of self-formation, one that can either reinforce or challenge normative understandings of gender. Highlighting this tension, she elaborates on the argument of Levinson and Holland (1996): "the contradiction and the paradoxes that characterize the complex relationship between educational processes and self-formation demonstrate[] how 'the educated person is culturally produced in definite sites, [but] the educated person also culturally produces cultural forms' (1996: 14)" (50). Borker argues that while these scholars have demonstrated this paradox, none have developed a theoretical tool to address it. Her work is an attempt to theorize the paradoxes madrasa students encounter on their educational journey from home to madrasa and then to university. To theorize this contradiction, she employs Appadurai's concept of the 'capacity to aspire' (8) and De Certeau's writings on the 'every day.'

Before doing so, the author engages with Saba Mahmood's seminal work on the Egyptian Mosque Movement, which challenges the understanding of women's agency within the binary of subordination and resistance. Drawing on Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Mahmood underscores the ethical agency of women participating in the

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mosque movement, attributing acts of modesty, shyness, and piety as agential expressions. In a traditional liberal feminist framework, these same acts are often seen as mere subordination to patriarchy. According to Borker, while Mahmood's work significantly challenges hegemonic assumptions within liberal feminist scholarship, it does not fully explain the "complexities of the larger socio-economic and political landscape in which the pious selves are cultivated" (53). Therefore, the tactics, paradoxes, and ambiguities in the everyday lives of the students at Madrasa Jamiatul Mominat cannot be explained by Mahmood's framework of agency, as the students are not consistent in their piety practices. Mahmood's account suggests a coherence of ethical performance in the everyday life of women, whereas recent anthropological studies have underlined "the contradictions and ambiguity inherent in the lived practices of Islamic piety" (54).

By following madrasa graduates from their homes to university spaces and into marriage and job markets, Borker argues that their aspirations and practices are not always coherent with the ideals of Islamic womanhood promoted by madrasa education. Through close observation of their hostel life—where they bypass madrasa rules by playing badminton, for example—and their comparisons of the freedom available at university versus the madrasa, the author highlights the tactical nature of the students' everyday practices. In her interactions with madrasa graduates studying at Jamia Millia, the girls reported facing significant disturbances from male graduates of other madrasas, a finding that clearly questions the ethical consistency of madrasa graduates more broadly.

Without a doubt, *Madrasas and the Making of Islamic Womanhood* is a thorough study of madrasas in general and women's madrasas in particular. Its pages reflect a nuanced understanding of madrasa education and gender in Islamic educational practices. Borker does not adhere to the dominant reproductive or empowerment frameworks but instead distances herself from them. She neither argues that the madrasa simply reproduces the traditional Islamic system nor that it empowers girls merely by granting access to religious education. Furthermore, she applies an anthropological approach while thoughtfully reflecting on the limitations and possibilities of anthropological methods, as demonstrated by recent studies in the field. The work skeptically questions the assumed liberating agency of modern formal education, especially concerning gender issues. By examining recent ethnographies like Liberalization's Children, Still's study of college-going Dalit girls, and Ciotti's study on Chamars in UP, the author highlights how expectations of education vary based on

caste and gender. Another strength of this work is its eclectic theoretical approach, blending perspectives from Appadurai's "capacity to aspire" (2013) and De Certeau's The Practice of Everyday Life (1988).

A central theme of the work is to demonstrate the contingent nature of piety and religious values in the lives of female madrasa students through rich ethnography and academic literature that problematizes piety's static nature. Mahmood questions the normative feminist framework that assigns agency only to acts of resistance, not to acts of adherence. The women in the mosque movement exercise agency by practicing religious ethical practices like veiling (Mahmood 25). Mahmood also demonstrates differences in perspective among rich, middle-class, and poor women regarding certain particulars of their practices (41-43). From this analysis, it is clear that Mahmood does not ascribe agency to these women without examining their engagements within their socio-economic contexts. The degree of piety may not be equal across every stratum of society, but the point is that the notion of religious agency—how to shape their lives—is present among women of different classes, even if it differs in its particulars. Therefore, the criticism that Mahmood fails to account for changing socio-economic backgrounds in formulating her hypothesis does not hold.

Another important problem is that Borker, by her own admission, does not reference madrasa textbooks due to her lack of fluency in Arabic and Urdu. While she rightly discourages academic trends that confine madrasa studies to discourses on terrorism and reform, arguing instead that madrasas should be seen primarily as educational institutions, her work ultimately ends up focusing on them as institutions for inculcating religious practice. This maintains a scholarly silence on the students' intellectual engagements.

Borker uses the 'capacity to aspire' to problematize two dominant claims: one, that madrasas inculcate a fixed religious subjectivity, and two, that they produce homogeneity and a lack of critical thinking. Here, the 'capacity to aspire,' though different for each girl, is an elemental component of everydayness. However, scholars like Nadia Fadil question the validity of this 'everyday' approach in studying ultra-orthodox practices, arguing that it can "end up discounting the validity, reality, and ontology of those framed as Salafi Muslims and invalidates ethnographic inquiry into ultra-orthodox Muslim life" (Fadil and Fernando 59). Within Salafi denominations, while external practices are important, internal mental states are key. An everyday practice that seems to break a norm may not constitute a break in the mental domain;

the individual may remain conscious of the norm, affirming its presence in their life. This consideration is not exclusive to Salafi Muslims and has implications for madrasa students, for whom mental state (niyyah) is also central to their practices. Therefore, it is crucial to inquire whether the 'capacity to aspire' truly breaks religious norms and distances madrasa graduates from the madrasa's influence, or whether it operates within a complex field where norm and aspiration are deeply intertwined.

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