

BOOK REVIEW

FEMALE ISLAMIC EDUCATION MOVEMENTS: THE RE- DEMOCRATISATION OF ISLAMIC KNOWLEDGE

Bano, M. (2017). *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-democratisation of Islamic Knowledge*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

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In *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-democratisation of Islamic Knowledge*, Masooda Bano conducts a rich analysis of female agency in Islamic education, within the context of the four Sunni *madhāhib* in three understudied contexts—Pakistan, Syria, and northern Nigeria. Although her analysis largely centers on high-quality ethnographic data, she also embeds her discussion within country-specific historical contexts, as well as that of Western feminism, to discuss attempts of female education and their effective outcomes, underpinning these outcomes in each national context as well as their implications for the wider Islamic world. She emphasizes the importance of feminism within national Islamic contexts, as opposed to its “standards set by Western liberal feminism” (p. 18), while also highlighting the persistent under-recognition of female education movements in scholarly research.

Evolving independently since the 1970s, as noted by Bano, the role of women in education has been critical in both initiation and implementation of these movements. Throughout her book, organized in three parts and seven chapters, the author weaves themes of female

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agency, gender roles, and Western feminism standards, within the contexts of conventional Islamic education and its implications for modernity. Given the distinct socio-historical variations of Islam in each of the nation's developments under the influence of both modernization and globalization (e.g., linguistic, post-colonial socio-economic and -political structures), Bano's synthesis of these themes makes her comparative analysis all the more compelling.

In the first chapter, Bano starts with a brief background of female education in the three countries of focus. The author embeds this introductory narrative within cultural contexts of growing religiosity in the studied countries. Bano continues by exploring the motivations behind these female education movements across the world that are independent of each other. She asks the overarching and critical questions of her research: "What then explains the demand for these apparently orthodox contemporary female Islamic education movements? And how are the readings of Islam that they promote shaping the socio-economic and political institutions within their host societies?" (p. 7). To answer these questions, she discusses the importance of the active role of Western and/or modern educated Muslim women in these movements whose translation of Islamic ethical studies (especially on gender roles) neither seek to fit in the ultra-traditional Islamic nor Western interpretations of women's position in society. Chapters 2 and 3 address why a "historically situated analysis" (p. 54) is needed to understand Islam's spread into the three regions at different periods. For a thorough examination of women's engagement with Islamic texts, the diversity of learning styles experienced by women either out of habit or through intellectual reasoning, and how they may relate their newly obtained Islamic knowledge to their modern lives as a result, must be taken into consideration.

Next, in the section called *Incentivizing the mixing of knowledge*, the author outlines the historical context of Islam especially in the production and transmission of knowledge, state-society relations, and the importance of "socio-economic, educational, and (most critically) cultural backgrounds of women" (p. 85) as significant influences on women's interpretations of the text. Chapters 4 through 6 bring together each state's response to modernization, and the role of the 'ulama' in defining the need for female education and educators. Within this context, the ultimate goal is not to constrain women within a fixed traditional position in society, but to reinforce their spiritual and intellectual development for their contribution to society. In the last section, the author highlights that the women at the educational institutions "respond to the teachings" differently due to the "realities of

their own lives” (p. 217). However, Islam’s “core principles” (p. 220) are preserved, which has only led to a diversity of understandings and practices.

Central to Bano’s analysis is the importance of a “historically situated analysis” (p. 54) to explore the long-term impact of educational institutions in their local context. While the specific time that gave birth to their emergence is important, the focus is not on investigating what led to them but how they remain running. Therefore, Bano discusses the changes in both the socio-economic and socio-political structures of Muslim societies’ critical forces that challenged conventional Islamic beliefs and practices, which have had a role in the evolution of these educational institutions. She guides the reader to abstain from seeing these institutions as separate from an “institutional framework of Islam” (p. 32) but to examine them through an evaluation of Islam and its interpretations that were shaped within a given context. In this regard, the individual goals of the educational organizations that are the focus of her study could be better explored. The author adds that textual interpretations should be included in such an analysis for a critical socio-cultural investigation of Islamic influences. Bano also draws attention to the lack of interest in successful outcomes of female education movements in scholarly research. This under-recognition and the issues with interpreting feminism through standards set from modern Western viewpoints not only leaves out the power and the role of female agency in social developments but also standardizes the norms and conditions of women’s empowerment from a single cultural (namely Western) lens.

Despite strong emphasis on understanding Islamic feminist initiatives from both Islamic and local contextual perspectives, Bano does not provide the reader with a wider and clearer definition of Islamic feminism. Whether it is the goal of the author to provide the reader with such a definition is not clear either. Instead, she presents its features in each given context and argues that it is the choice of women involved in these movements, especially in the perpetuation of their institutions, which make it feminist. In spite of its strong emphasis on the importance of historical, socio-economic, socio-political, and cultural structures in its relation to Islamic education movements in each country’s context, the book is limited in presenting detailed information on each of these aforementioned structures for all three nations of its focus. Rather, it serves as a guidance on conducting research in similar topics in a local context, especially from a comparative point of view. Its denseness in language might also be inaccessible to some readers.

Unique in its kind, this work can be a fundamental source in understanding female agency in the initiation and implementation of

education movements. Marrying the ongoing influences of traditional Islamic beliefs and practices with female agency requires a historical analysis of the Islamic faith, while being attentive to important regional and cultural variations, and that is clearly emphasized by Masooda Bano in this book. It is a critical addition especially in the fields of education, religion, and cultural anthropology for scholars, researchers, and students.

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