

Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-Democratisation of Islamic Knowledge

MASOODA BANO,

Cambridge University Press, 2017, 245 pages.

Even though Nigeria, Syria and Pakistan are diverse countries from several aspects, Masooda Bano's ethnographic study brings them together to examine the developments that particularly facilitate women's participation in the processes of Islamic knowledge production. As the author notes in the preface of the book, the emergence of new institutions in the 1970s welcomed Muslim women to the study of Islamic knowledge in each of these regions, a field that had lost its significance in their colonial past. Additionally, most of these institutions preserved an orthodox Sunni understanding of Islam instead of ultraconservative or modernist readings and were largely endorsed by both conservative and progressive 'ulama. The abundance of similarities between these geographically distant movements is described as the "unity in diversity" by the author (217) and placed in the broader context of Islamic revival.

Bano frequently engages with the existing scholarship on female Islamic movements and offers a clear picture of her position in the relevant debates. In this regard, Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2012, rev. ed.) remarkably gets the most references, which is not surprising due to its focus on a similar phenomenon in Egypt. Mahmood observes women's study circles in Cairo mosques and critiques the Western feminist conception of agency by demonstrating that these women adhere to the Islamic ethical norms rather willingly. According to Bano, however, Mahmood falls into the same mistake by attributing this willingness to the "weight of history," or simply to habit. In her own words:

...while defending the agency of the women in these Islamic movements, Mahmood in reality ends up taking all agency away from them by refusing to recognise that their adherence to an apparently non-liberal movement could be a result of conscious appreciation of the ideals proposed by a moral framework alternative to that of Western liberalism. (26)

Unlike Mahmood, Bano does not consider these movements to be "inherently non-liberal" (26), neither does she ascribe women's involvement in them to a shared, single motivation, as this would be "a very selective reading" (22) and "a major oversight" (14). She asserts that factors such as

educational level and socioeconomic background of women have a profound impact on why they gravitate toward Islamic literacy. The reason is especially significant in the case of women from modern-educated and upper-income backgrounds, as the author notes that they seek to engage with Islamic texts predominantly for intellectual fulfillment (176–177). For them, the increasing exposure to Western societies has ironically built up confidence in Islam's potential for offering solutions to the problems of the modern world (49).

Another recurring title that has a noticeable influence on the author's theorization of Islamic knowledge production is Josiah Ober's *Democracy and Knowledge* (2008). In parallel with Ober's three-step classification of aggregation, alignment, and codification as the epistemic processes in ancient Athenian institutions (36–7), Bano lists coordination, dissemination, and codification as the democratic processes of knowledge production in early Muslim societies. She explains that these processes assured that the prerequisite for the legitimacy of political authority was its compliance with the shari'a, whose interpretation was in the hands of the 'ulama, as well as the circulation of knowledge across the society through mosques and madrasas (67–70). In this regard, I must admit that I find Bano's unconditional adoption of the term "codification" with reference to shari'a confusing. To give an example, she states that "the fact that shari'a was the law of the state ensured that all new answers to contemporary challenges were codified in terms which were consistent with the demands of shari'a" (83). By doing so, she seems to take no account of the fact that shari'a remained uncoded for the most part of the Islamic legal history. In reality, it was not until the late 19th century that the first instance of codification, i.e., the Ottoman civil code "Mecelle," was created due to Western influence. This, in fact, is one of the unique characteristics of the Islamic law that kept it flexible for centuries. Unsurprisingly, Bano does not elaborate on the alleged codification of shari'a as it is far from the focus of her study; but the employment of a word that carries a specialized meaning such as "codification" awaits further clarification.

Nevertheless, Bano argues that this threefold process enabled all of the members of the society, including non-Muslims, to take part in the democratized knowledge production actively. However, this pattern was disrupted when colonial rule gained control in all three regions that are the subjects of this study. The replacement of shari'a by Western codes inevitably resulted in the loss of relevance of the platforms that were controlled by the 'ulama. Gradually, confidence in Islam's ability to produce answers for modern problems dissolved (46, 72–75). These states eventually gained independence from the colonial rule, only to be followed by the failed promises of

modernity by their new governments. The resulting frustration, along with other factors, has sparked an interest in revisiting Islamic knowledge.

Bano interprets the emergence of female Islamic movements in Muslim societies as a manifestation of this broader aspiration toward Islamic revival. She asserts that:

The Western-educated, professional, and culturally progressive Muslim women whose lives are heavily embedded in modern institutions, on coming to the study of traditional Islamic texts with due respect for the 'ulama and traditional body of shari'a, end up being able to create new modernities which in conception have much in common with Western modernity yet retain a distinct Islamic identity. (39)

Thus, she extends her analysis to the wider phenomenon of Islamic revival in the age of modernity and points to the shift toward a more intellectually engaged understanding of Islam among Muslims both in Muslim majority countries and the diaspora, without failing to mention the growing influence of convert scholars. In conclusion, the book not only fulfills its central promise but also performs above expectations. It ends on a hopeful tone by sharing the observation that through the platforms that enable the re-democratization of Islamic knowledge by bringing diverse parts of the society together around a shared pursuit, solutions to contemporary challenges can be delivered within the Islamic frame of reference.

Ayşegül Şimşek
PhD candidate
Marmara University
Istanbul, Turkey

DOI: 10.2979/jems.2.1.11



*A Political Economy of Arab Education: Policies
and Comparative Perspectives*

MOHAMED ALAA ABDEL-MONEIM
Routledge, 2019, 268 pages.

Despite a large growing population, the Arab world still lags well behind other parts of the world in the quality of education. There have been modest, if any, reforms in the education system. In *A Political Economy of Arab*