Segregating Secular from Religious: A case Study of Female Madāris in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

[*] Javaria Raza
[**] Saleem Khan

Abstract

Pursuance of knowledge has been emphasized by all religions and fulfillment of role is adopted by madāris in Islamic tradition. The madāris have long history of spreading knowledge since the life of Holy Prophet Mohammad (SAW). However, curriculum of the institutions changed with change in time and space. Consistent with the argument, madāris in subcontinent, particularly in Pakistan, have experienced a drastic change in their curricula, bifurcating secular from religious knowledge. Hence, the current study is designed to know the reasons and impacts of such trend in female madāris of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Acknowledging the key status of Muhtamim, five of them in five different madāris were selected through convenient sampling. Analyzing the data from interpretivist's approach it is found that the act of restricting the curriculum to religious subjects only is basically a strategy of the Muhtamimīn to continue their authority over masses and particularly the females.

Keywords: Female Madāris, patriarchy, religious knowledge, secular education

Introduction

Pursuing education has always been a vital part of the Muslim society. Islam has always highlighted the two main forms of knowledge, i.e., divine knowledge (which man received from Allah) and discovered knowledge, which the humans discover while living in universe. Islamic education emphasizes on both kinds of education or knowledge. It also stresses both men and women to acquire this knowledge.[1] Islam do not restrict education to divine knowledge only because the worldly knowledge supplements the Qur'ānic knowledge in order to enable Muslims to lead disciplined lives in this world.

Mosque has been the central learning place and the first school in Islamic history. Prophet Mohammad (S.A.W) used mosque to deliver the revelations and its interpretation.[2] And it was mosque where Qur'ān was compiled. Early Muslims used to come to mosque for discussing the daily routine issues and to get their solutions from the knowledgeable persons. Also the issues other than daily problems and that pertaining to different life aspects were also came under discussion in these sittings. Thus, it got the status of first School in Islam.

At that time the scholars (knowledgeable persons) used to visit mosques and refine their skills by debating with others. Others resorted to mosque for getting assistance in understanding issues related to daily lives in the light of Qur'ān.

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), when Muslims failed to find precedents of solving particular issues in Qur'ān, the scholars referred to *Sīrah* and *Hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)[3]

This set up the tradition *Sīrah* or *Sunnah,* (the knowledge of deeds of the Prophet) and *Hadith,* (the sayings of the Prophet). Thus, mosque sustained the central position in Muslim society. However, when the message of Islam disseminated across other regions, a need for

[*] Javaria Raza, Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Peshawar, Pakistan

[**] Lecturer, Department of Islamiyat, University of Peshawar, Pakistan

a class of Muslim experts emerged for writing textbooks on *Fiqah* (Islamic jurisprudence), *Sunnah* (Prophet's traditions), *Hadith* (Prophet's sayings), and *Tafsīr* (the interpretation of the Qur'ān) to cater to the needs of non-Arab Muslim populations.[4] At this time the tradition of *Madrassah* started with purpose of preserving religious values through uniform teachings of Islam and accomplishing the saying of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W) " طلب العلم فريضة

"على كل مسلم (receiving education is the duty of all Muslims)[5] The first known *Madrassah* is said to have been established in 1005 AD by the Fatimid caliphs in Egypt.[6] These early madāris focused on preparing students for two types of duties: academic religious studies to generate a cadre of religious leaders and worldly knowledge to produce a class of administrators for different institutions and departments in different parts of Muslim society. Thus, madāris were a place of religious knowledge and were serving as training academies for different professions as well.[7] A salient feature of these madāris was the concept of *Ijtihād* (the power and ability to think independently).[8]

The conquer of Muslims empires by the crusaders and other enemies, the spirit of learning and mastery in religion faced decline and '*Ulamā*' (literally meaning the scholar) of the time rejected the idea of getting worldly knowledge the *Ijtihad*– independent reasoning.[9] This step was taken to regain the old enjoyed status, respect and honor. Similarly, the European renaissance, the Muslim education structure was on decline. The historical downfall of Muslim world caused the change in the focus and spirit of *Madrassah* education, functions and philosophy of the madāris all over the Muslim world. Many of them restricted themselves exclusively to the teachings of Islam as prescribed in the Qur'ān. '*Ulamā'* used the verses from the Qur'ān to justify their position of restricting themselves to the Divine sciences only.[10]

They considered that worldly knowledge to be secondary one and should be trimmed according to Islamic laws and knowledge. British colonialism was the last nail in the coffin of the Muslim empire and the Muslim educational system as well. This curtailed *Madrassah* education to the poor and religious families only. The contrast between new British and *Madrassah* education systems resulted separating education into two parallels i.e., worldly education for the upper class and sacred education for the lower class.[11] Along with this, British rulers also introduced the idea of separate state and religion, which was equivalent to deviation from the religious values and principles for the Muslim leaders. This system of government (separated by British rulers from religion) did not need for the approval of/from religion. Islamic scholars criticized this system as they regarded it as against the Muslim code of life and their ('*Ulamā'*) own power. This led to tensions with and resistance to the government policies and actions on part of Muslim population.[12]

Indian Sub-Continent was one of the regions where *Madrassah* faced drastic changes in regard to its curriculum, philosophy and spirit. When British rule established the new system of education, the *('Ulamā'* alleged the system to be against the established Islamic education, rules and Islamic identity. Thus they considered it as a foremost duty to maintain their original structure and identity. That is why the curriculum was limited to religious subjects and knowledge only thus discarding the studying of worldly sciences. The madāris in other regions had a change in the curriculum but their system of education mostly remained the same like that of the early times. In Egypt, the renowned Madrassah system Al-Azhar still offers the combination of subjects including both Islamic as well as the worldly subjects.[13]

Bourdieu stated in his study that educational institutions reproduce the specific class or specific class structure. He holds that education is one of the key factors in the reproduction of inequality in society. *Cultural capital* occupies a central position in process of social reproduction as it refers to communicable "cultural codes and practices capable of securing a return to their holders" [14]

which in Bourdieu's term, is *habitus*, Bourdieu argued that this reproduction is facilitated in schools, and he regards the school "a central agent of social exclusion and reproduction" [15] This study aims to analyze the teaching practices and curricula of madāris in detail to know the reasons why these madāris deprived their students from studying secular subjects, and also to know why this dichotomy prevails even in contemporary world where development depends upon modern educational system.

The bird eye view of Madrassah history was presented to understand the contents of its curriculum with changing circumstances. The present study focuses upon the current patterns of curriculum in female madāris in Pakistan. The standing of the Madrassah In-charges (Muhtamimīn) is analyzed in the context of local Pakhtūn culture.

Methodology

Qualitative research method is used for conducting the study. The issue of Madrassah needs an in-depth examination of its different aspects and factors. For the current study, interpretive approach is used because the stance of the managers of madāris on the dichotomy of secular and religious subjects is important. The Muhtamimīn are the In-charge of female madāris who manage all affairs of madāris ranging from curriculum setting to fee and accommodation of students. Therefore, it is felt that their stance on the importance of secular and religious subjects would enable the researcher to know what subjects they consider important for women/females and why they do not need secular subjects. Five Muhtamimīn from five different madāris were interviewed. Most of the Muhtamimīn were reluctant to participate in research; therefore, the researcher has to opt for those who agreed to participate in the activity. In-depth interviews with Muhtamimīn of female madāris in Peshawar were conducted to get a clear picture of the issue.

Discussion

The Madrassah is an "evolving institution visibly marked by the world-transforming forces of our age: religious reform, the ascent of the West, nationalism, the develop mentalists state, and mass education" [16] The aim and concern of contemporary madāris is to give attention particularly to develop spirituality and moral values commonly called 'Akhlāq' (character) and "Adab" (good conduct or civility) along with an alternative to public education, where the public schools are limited in number and or poor quality. [17] Madāris, regarded as the largest nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) networks by its advocates, provide a "basic education safety net; socialization to certain norms of proper behavior and knowledge, and an awareness of an Islamic identity". [18] They have shunned the secular subjects from their curricula, and focus only on religious subjects/ Islamic sciences like Tafsīr, Ḥadith, Fiqh, and others. The historical reason behind change in focus of madāris curriculum could be traced back to British colonial era, where the British had started the modern school system [19] and sidelined madāris. Before that time madāris used to be centers of religious and secular learning. [20]

The same restricted curriculum is being taught for last few centuries in both male and female madāris in Pakistan. However, the female madāris curriculum is further trimmed and modified by the owners/managers of the madāris. The current study focused on female

madāris of Peshawar (capital city of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province). There is a strict Pakhtūn culture in this province, characterized by strong patriarchal structures, which limit the mobility and opportunities of women in this region. In Pakhtun culture women is considered as 'made for home', as a Pashto proverb demonstrating, "woman is either for home or for grave". Therefore, her educational patterns are different from that of male/men. Even the madāris perpetuates the same patriarchal structures through their curriculum and teaching styles. The Muhtamims were of the view that women is made to obey and they should be submissive and humble. And these qualities could only be achieved through religious education. One of the Muhtamims said:

 "Madrasah education imparts patience, obedience, humbleness and submissiveness, while these elements are not substantive part of secular education".

They were not only critical of the secular subjects but also against the secular education (al) and/or institutions. According to Muhtamimīn these secular institutions are basically misleading the women folk of our society, by detaching them from their real aim of life. The aim of a woman according to Muhtamimīn is:

"The aim of women's life is to manage her home, socialize her children on Islamic lines and 'obey' her family members (especially male)"

During interviews all of the Muhtamimīn stressed on 'obeying' of female. This obedience is the quality of 'good Muslim woman' according to these Muhtamimīn. An interesting finding of the study is that the Muhtamimīn stressing on the obedience of women argued that they (women) must obey Allah and immediately said and the males of their family (especially husbands). This shows that madāris are making the minds of their student's to be obedient and respectful (in other words docile).

The Muhtamimīn hold that the secular education is waste of time especially for females, as they do not need secular degrees, because their actual place is their home where they do not need the degrees rather they need the skill to manage home and her relations.

As one of the Muhtamim said:

"They (students of secular education) are wasting their time. Because after their marriage, they will have to take care of their husband and children, so their degrees would go astray. They are not respectful to their relatives and obedient to their husbands as the Madrassah graduates are".

Women are expected to be submissive and dutiful. [21]

These norms and characteristics are inculcated through social institution like madāris of Pakhtūn society. The Muhtamimīn are of the view that the real place of woman is her home, and the education of women must prepare them to perform that role in an effective way. The modern school education does not focus on this primary aim; however, these madāris are focusing on this function. Women has to marry early and therefore her secular education get wasted, because they socialize the girls to focus on worldly matters like earning/ employment which is not her duty, while these secular educational institutions fails to produce/inculcate the norms and skills beneficial and necessary for girls to live their life. These ideas of Muhtamimīn actually portray the socio-cultural status and place of woman, which is either her home or the grave.

Secondly, madāris stress to produce a class of young females equipped with the religious knowledge, which can transmit that knowledge to their next generation and reproduce the same class. Elaborating the same stance the Muhtamim said:

"Islamic madāris have the aim to impart the religious knowledge and teach Islamic sciences offering deeper understanding of Islam. While the secular schools and educational institutions are imparting skills only which are just for earning livelihood in this world. Then how will they (the students) know their basis, their origin and their real aim of sending them to this world, when they study just worldly issues".

The stance of the Muhtamim was clear that they are actually preparing a cadre of women who will socialize the future generations in a specific Islamic manner. And for which they need only religious education instead of any degree of secular institution. The secular education is seen as misleading the society by inculcating the western ideas and practices in Islamic society that are against the cultural and religious values. These secular education/ subjects are actually manmade and they cannot be compared with the divine subjects. Manmade things have limited scope and they always focus worldly gains/benefits only. On the basis of these reasons, Muhtamimīn and the religious institutions shunned the secular subjects from their curriculum.

In the words of Bourdieu these are actually 'reproducing' the specific class of good Muslim ladies, who are raise in 'habitus' of madāris and will be able to reproduce the same structure and transmit the same practices and normative codes of the patriarchal structure of Pakhtūn society.

Conclusion

The meaning and purpose of education for Islamic educational institutions (Madāris) is different from the secular one. Islamic education is regarded more important for females, which aims to develop moral values, norms of obedience and success of life in this world and hereafter. It is considered as the only mean to achieve blessed life in world and 'Jannah' (paradise) after death, which is the ultimate aim of mankind. While secular education is viewed/seemed by the Muhtamimīn as meaningless and mundane. These institutions are an important part of patriarchal Pakhtūn culture that is reproducing the patriarchal norms for which the curriculum of madāris is tailored and modified by the 'Muhtamimīn'. The curriculum is restricted to religious knowledge so that the minds /women themselves could be controlled in the name of religion and made to accept the male dominated structure of the society. Bourdieu in his study of class reproduction said that education reproduce the same normative codes and practices leading to the reproduction of class, while the current study found that these madāris not only reproduces specific class, normative patterns but also reproduce the same curriculum and teaching styles. These structures deny the importance of secular subjects/ secular education, which the Muhtamimīn think spread immoral and unrealistic norms in the society. The secular subjects misled women and misplaced them from their real place.

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