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## **Cultural Reproduction through Female *Madaris*: a case study of Peshawar**

(This material has been taken from my PhD thesis titled “Effectiveness of female *Madaris* in women’s empowerment in Pakistan”.)

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### **Abstract**

Muslim education system was one of the best educational systems in history. These educational institutes produced scholars, chemists, biologists, physicians and experts in others fields as well. However, today *Madrassah* graduates are limited to teach in *Madaris* or if got equivalent degree in schools. This study is an attempt to unearth the reason of this limited focus of *Madaris* syllabi and its impact on overall society. This paper utilises qualitative approach and interview method was used to collect data. This study concludes that *Madaris* has taken a reactionary measure to the worldly (non-religious) education to protect society from the deviating from the existing norms of patriarchal structures and bring back women to their original role through reinforcement of their ‘good Muslim women’ characteristics through *madrassah* education.

**Key words:** habitus, patriarchal structures, cultural reproduction, good *Muslim* women

### **Introduction**

Religious schools in the shape of female *Madaris* train womenfolk for their perceived role in society. However, these educational institutions installed their existence in local culture of Pakistani society to address/counter the negative impact of modernism. This paper is an effort to

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explore and highlight the existing paradigm of female *Madaris* to educate women into the existing cultural patterns and to analyze the adopted mechanism for achieving their goal. Secondly, this paper also attempt to clarify the views of these educational institutions about the secular education in Pakistan. Although, *Madaris* have been considered one of the alternatives to mainstream education system in contemporary world, yet they are criticized for fundamentalists/extremists approach. However, their role has remained controversial. This study evaluates the curriculum and pedagogy in *Madaris* to ascertain the extent to which they offer an appropriate educational experience for women and adopting the mechanism of inculcating the cultural specific roles considered appropriate for women.

Educational institutions play pivotal role in promotion of development indicators in general and human development in particular. During the British regime, a new secular educational system was introduced in the sub-continent. It was perceived, by religious scholars of the time, to be a threat to the Islamic identity of the Muslims. In this context the *Madrassah* system in India took upon itself the task of opposing the cultural and educational hegemony of the British. It is important to point out, however, that the *Madrassah* system in the Indian sub-continent was unique in how it developed. Compared to the rest of the Muslim world in the sub-continent the *Madrassah* curriculum was restricted to the attainment of religious knowledge only. The *Madaris* in the Arab world also changed a little in terms of the orientation of the Islamic curriculum but they integrated the system of education that was established in the early development of the *Madrassah* in Baghdad, with the teaching of the secular subjects. This is especially true for Egypt where, under the *Al-Azhar* education system, the secular subjects compliment the Islamic education (Haqqani, 2002).

This study aims to analyze the teaching practices and mind set of *Madaris* in Pakistan in an attempt to understand why these *Madaris* do not include of secular subjects. It also attempt to understand why the religious and secular education system dichotomy prevails even in the contemporary world where development depends upon modern educational system. In order to do this it is important to examine the standing of the *Madrassah* In-charges (*Muhtamims*), analyzed in the context of local *Pakhtun* culture. In summary, the study questions the existing structure of *Madaris* curriculum in the democratic state of Pakistan. It challenges the place of an

exclusively religious education in the contemporary world and its compatibility with the Pakistan's development agenda.

### **Methodology:**

The data generated from this study was produced through adopting a qualitative methodology. The issue of *Madrassah* requires an in-depth examination of its different aspects and dimensions. For the current study an interpretive approach was used to explore the dichotomy of secular and religious subjects in Pakistan from the perspective of the *Muhtamims*. The perspectives of the *Muhtamims* are important because they direct and manage all the aspects of the female *Madaris*, ranging from curriculum setting to fee and arranging the accommodation of students.

In-depth interviews with five *Muhtamims* (all of them being male) of female *Madaris* in Peshawar were conducted. These *Muhtamims* are all affiliated with the *Deobandi*<sup>6</sup> sect. *Deobandi Madaris* are one of the largest established networks of *Madaris* for both male and female. *Deobandis* constitute the largest Muslim segment having a significant control over *Madaris* in Pakistan (Kamran, n.d). Around 65 percent of the *Madaris* belong to this sect and “are the most militant in their demands for the Pakistani state to become truly Islamic-as they would define it” (Stephen, 2003).

Entering these closed communities (female *Madaris*) was a difficult task, as they do not allow any outsiders into their premises. We appealed to an ‘insider’ gatekeeper to negotiate access for us. A relative of one of the researchers, who himself is a *Muhtamim* in another city, helped to get permission to approach and then gain access to these institutions.

### **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 developmentalists state, and mass education” (Talib, 2008, p. 449). Primary aim of contemporary *Madaris* to give attention particularly to character building and moral values commonly called ‘*Akhlaq*’ (character) and

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<sup>6</sup>Deobandi is one of the prominent sub-sects of Sunni Islam in South Asia. Who are strict and conservative in their ideological stance as compared to other sub-sects like Baralvi, Ahl-e-Hadith and Salafi.

‘*Adab*’ (good conduct or civility). Along with character and morality *Madaris* are an alternative to public education, where the public schools are limited in number and/ or of poor quality (Boyle, 2006, p.480). *Madaris* are regarded as the largest nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Pakistan, according to their advocates, they provide a “basic education safety net; socialization to certain norms of proper behavior and knowledge, and an awareness of an Islamic identity” (Park & Niyozov, 2008, p. 332). *Madaris* have been trying to preserve such religiosity and narrow outlook from the time of defeat of Muslim empires (Andarabi et al, 2005; Farooq, 2010; Haqqani, 2007).

In the sub-continent in particular, they have excluded the secular subjects from their curricula, and focus only on religious subjects/Islamic sciences like *Hadith*, *Fiqah*, *Tafseer*, and others. The historical reason behind the change in focus of *Madaris* curriculum can be traced back to British colonial era, where British rulers introduced the modern school system (Anzar, 2003; ICG, 2002) in an attempt to marginalize *Madaris*. Before that time, *Madaris* used to be centers of religious and secular learning (Farooq, 2005; Malik, 2008).

A restricted outlook of *Madaris* has various reasons (as discussed later in this section). The current ‘all religious’ curriculum has been taught for last few centuries in both male and female *Madaris* in Pakistan. However, as we shall see, the curriculum for females *Madaris* is further restricted and modified by the owners/managers of the *Madaris*. The current study focused on female *Madaris* of Peshawar<sup>7</sup>. There is a strict Pakhtoon culture in this province, characterized by strong patriarchal structures, which limit the mobility and opportunities for women in this region. In Pakhtoon culture, women are considered to be ‘made for home’, as a Pashto<sup>8</sup> proverb demonstrates, “woman is either for home or for grave”. Therefore, her educational patterns are different from that of male/men. The *Madaris* perpetuate the established patriarchal structures through their curriculum and teaching styles. Secular subjects are regarded irrelevant for Pakhtoon women (the study focused the Pakhtoon area only). All the interviewees were critical of secular subjects; their arguments were based on two major concerns about secular subjects, which they presented as reasons for not allowing/ abandoning these worldly subjects in *Madaris*.

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<sup>7</sup>Peshawar is the capital city of Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa province

<sup>8</sup>Pashto, Pukhto, pushtu is a native language of Pakhtoon

First, the secular subjects are designed to be utilized for worldly affairs like jobs which is outside the domain of women and it has little importance for Muslims' in life hereafter. Secondly, these secular subjects make girls immoral, disrespectful and disobedient and thus creating disturbance in society. As women are expected to be obedient, submissive, the secular education is considered to inculcate the opposite to this expectations.

Islamic *Madaris* concentrate on providing what are assumed to be the skills to enable women to live a religious life. The curriculum is designed to enable women to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' deeds. *Madaris* owners of almost all sects have a particular mind set about worldly affairs and appropriate educational systems (as mentioned above). Anzar (2008) in a study on the pedagogical practices of Islamic *Madaris* argues that these institutions in Indian Sub-Continent (now India and Pakistan) had excluded secular subjects from their curriculum, assuming its origin to be Western and, hence, a threat to Islam and its ideology. The argument was verified by the present study as one of the *Muhtamims* in Peshawar while explaining the aim and purpose of *Madaris*, said:

“Islamic *Madaris* have the aim to impart 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 being sent to this world, when they study just worldly issues? *Masha' Allah*<sup>9</sup> our students know all this, they know how to spend life according to Islam and why they are sent to the earth and what is their main purpose in life. When you meet both graduates, you will feel that there is obvious difference in their outlook, way of talking, behavior and manners”.

The *Muhtamims* were very critical of the mainstream schools and educational system, they think that the scope of secular education is very limited and just caters for worldly affairs. They consider the Islamic education to have a broader vision, teaching not only about issues of present life, but matters related to life hereafter as well. It not only makes a student able to live a life as

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<sup>9</sup> Masha' Allah is an Arabic word, means all praises be to Allah. It is mostly used when a person praises something.  
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successful member of the society but also enables to know how to succeed in life hereafter. A similar argument was also given by another *Muhtamim* in Peshawar:

“Islamic *Madaris* and especially our *Madrassah* aim to teach the best curriculum which will enable females to live a successful life and become good Muslim ladies. Our graduates know how to spend their lives according to the teachings of Islam and also know their duties. Schools on the other hand don't offer these subjects (the divine subjects). Can you name a single school offering such subjects? No, you cannot; it is because these institutions focus on this world only and their teachings are only for living in this world. But our subjects are actually fulfilling Allah's command and are a source for success in this world and the world after this life.”

Thus, the *Muhtamims* have divided education into immanent (secular) and transcendent (religious). They are actually opposed to the immanent/ secular subjects which in their view have very little importance for humans. While Islam is the religion of all times and for all people, but *Muhtamims* and religious patriarchs own Islam and are using it according to their vested interest. The curriculum of these *Madaris* comprise recitation and memorizing sections from the Qur'an, *Tajweed/Tajwid* (methods of recitation of Qura'n), *Tafseer* (exegesis), *Fiqah* (Islamic Law), Islamic History, *Sirat/ sirah* (biography of the Prophet Muhammad {S.A.W.}), *Hadith* (sayings/traditions of the Prophet Muhammad {S.A.W.}), throughout the five years of *Madrassah* education. Along with these major subjects, daily *azkaars*, readings for girls like *Fazail-e-Aamal*<sup>10</sup> (the virtues of daily actions), *Bahashti- Zewar*<sup>11</sup> (ornament of heaven/ heavenly ornaments) are the part of their routine activities. All these subjects offered at female *Madaris* are actually focusing on inculcating the traditional obedient role of women. As Sikand stated, inside the *madarssah*, girls do not waste a single minute, they have something to read/ recite all the time (Sikand, 2001). ‘Islamic womanhood’ model is kept in mind while designing the curriculum (Bano, 2010; Winkelmann, 2005). Like Winkelmann's study the *Muhtamims* and teachers of *Madaris* considered these to be the only beneficial subjects for girls. They thought that religious education would help women to lead a pious life in a mundane world. They argue that the secular

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<sup>10</sup>A booklet, comprising supplications of daily routine, written by Islamic Scholars

<sup>11</sup>An advisory book, especially for female, written by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi in late 18<sup>th</sup> century, including advices for daily activities ranging from daily practices to maintaining relationships

subjects are unimportant and misleading. They did not like even to compare both types of education, as one of the *Muhtamims* in Peshawar said:

“In my opinion religious education is a source of success in this world, and world hereafter. We groom our students in such a way that they will not use their education as a source of earning, rather it is their sole duty to serve the religion and strengthen our own system”.

Like most religious scholars, the above mentioned *Muhtamim* was also critical of secular world and secular subjects. Ironically, male graduates were allowed to utilize these equivalent degrees for acquiring jobs in secular educational institutions but female students were not allowed to do so.

Thus these institutions are actually limiting the educational and occupational prospects of female students. The result is that they are confined to their homes, where they have to look after their children and other family members especially male family members, so that they can earn their place in Heaven. This education fosters a *habitus* (in words of Bourdieu) that is closely attuned to the values of submission, familial piety, and preparation for an afterlife, rather than challenging the existing social order. The content of the religious curriculum, therefore, becomes a means of transmitting these values across generations, ensuring that the gendered division of labor and the subordination of women within both familial and broader societal structures are maintained. In Bourdieu’s terms, this education works as a mechanism of *social reproduction*, preserving the existing social order by inculcating specific cultural dispositions and limiting alternative forms of knowledge or self-empowerment.

Respondents of the study, the *Muhtamims* particularly, were critical of mainstream education system: It has no role in shaping the personalities of the students in a positive way and in teaching them the manners and equipping girls with the Islamic values/norms that they believe are essential for a successful life in society. Furthermore, they believe that secular education promotes the western value of individual freedom which is in conflict with the local culture of Pakhtoon society and its religious value systems whereas, religious institutions instruct students how to ‘spend’ their lives (in a positive and successful way), according to the expectations of

Muslim society. Religious institutions claim to focus on personality development instead of making students ‘money making machines’ (as quoted by a respondent).

*Madrassah* is considered, by the *Muhtamims*, a place where the students specifically female students, are taught to be more respectful, obedient, caring because they will receive its reward in this life and in the life hereafter. The whole day they are being given lessons to be obedient to the ‘Creator’ (Allah) then to His people which include not only teachers but parents, other family members and relatives as well. According to the *Muhtamims*, the *Madaris* train and purify the minds and soul of these graduates; they not only equip them with religious knowledge, they teach them how to serve humanity, respect elders and their place in society- as a daughter, sister, wife and a mother. It is regarded as ‘*Adab*’ or ‘value education’ by Winkelmann. Winkelmann (2005) stated that *Adab* is inculcated not only through the subjects taught but also through the daily routine activities and even in the whole atmosphere of *Madrassah*. In their opinion they try to bring about wellbeing, prosperity, revitalization/development of individuals and the society as a whole.

The discussion clearly indicates the different aims and scales of the Islamic and secular education systems from the perspective of *Muhtamims*. Bano (2010) notes that the reason religious leaders and *Muhtamims* dislike secular education is that it has the potential of inflicting upon the young women in particular the stigma of being too liberal and too worldly in their outlook. This will lead to girls enjoying more freedom and experience limited checks and restrictions on their behavior. Our respondents also affirmed these observations about secular education. Thus, the division between secular and religious education for females can be viewed as a battleground where different forms of cultural capital and *habitus* are cultivated, each reinforcing particular social orders and gendered expectations. The rejection of secular education by religious authorities, as seen in the case of the *Muhtamims* in *Madaris*, can be understood as an effort to control the cultural reproduction of gender roles, ensuring that women remain within the boundaries set by patriarchal values, thus preventing the emergence of competing forms of knowledge that might disrupt the status quo.

Religious education induces humbleness (for females, this humbleness is synonym of obedience). In contrast, secular education, according to the students in *Madaris* we interviewed,



encourages selfishness that eventually leads to an exclusive focus on personal concerns. They argued that secular education leads a person to individualism, which is a ‘western concept’, where no one cares for others but just think of themselves and pursue their own personal interests. This is why parents with a traditional outlook prefer to send their daughters to *Madrassah*; their intention and aspiration is for devout, obedient and dutiful daughters, who are content to reproduce and protect traditional and patriarchal structures. The *Muhtamims* were of the view that women are 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:

“*Madrassah* 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 educational institutions. According to *Muhtamims* 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 *Muhtamims* 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 *Muhtamims* emphasized the utmost importance of ‘obedience’ in females. Obedience is the primary quality of ‘good Muslim woman’ according to these *Muhtamims*. However, the *Muhtamims* emphasized that the obedience of women was translated in everyday life to women’s obedience to the males of their family (especially fathers and husbands) next to Allah. This shows that *Madaris* are dedicated to reproducing traditional patriarchal gender roles and expectations. Women are expected to be submissive and dutiful (Farooq, 2005). These norms and characteristics are inculcated through social institution like *Madaris* of Pakhtoon society. In Pakhtoon culture early marriage is the norm, therefore secular education for girls is considered a waste because it socialize the girls to focus on worldly matters like earning and employment which is not considered her duty. Thus, from this perspective the secular educational institutions fail to inculcate the norms and skills beneficial and necessary for

girls to live their lives. Secondly, *Madaris* emphasize the importance of producing young women equipped with religious knowledge, which will be transmitted to their next generation and reproduce the same social structure and the next generation of obedient women. Elaborating the same stance the *Muhtamim* said:

“Islamic *Madaris* 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 the real aim of sending them to this world, when they study just worldly issues”.

The stance of the *Muhtamim* clearly reflects that they are actually preparing a cadre of women who will socialize the coming generations in a specific lifestyle. The secular education is seen as misleading the society by inculcating the western ideas and practices in Islamic society that are against their alleged cultural and religious values. These secular education/ subjects are considered to be “man-made” and they cannot be compared with the divine subjects. Manmade things have limited scope and focus upon developing the skills for worldly gains/benefits only. This is why the *Muhtamims* excluded the secular subjects from their curriculum.

## CONCLUSION

In the words of Bourdieu *Madaris* are actually ‘reproducing’ the specific class of good Muslim ‘women’, who are socialized in the ‘habitus’ of *Madaris* for the purpose of reproducing the social structure and are thus, the transmitter (and in turn the reproducers, biologically and socially) of the practices and normative codes of the patriarchal structure of Pakhtoon society.

Bourdieu holds that education is one of the key factors in the reproduction of inequality in society. *Cultural capital* has a central position in this social reproduction process as inequalities in cultural capital lead to inequalities in social class. Cultural capital refers to communicable “cultural codes and practices capable of securing a *return* to their holders” (Tzanakis, 2011) which in Bourdieu’s term, is *habitus* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p 204-205). Bourdieu argued that this reproduction is facilitated in schools, and he regards the school “a central agent

of social exclusion and reproduction”. However, what can be observed from our study is that the dichotomous education system in parts of Pakistan is resulting in the social reproduction of disadvantage in terms of human capital. That is, through excluding so-called secular subjects in female Madaris. These young women are not only being encouraged into traditional gender roles, but their lack of marketable human capital in terms of qualifications and applicable and transferable knowledge will make it extremely difficult for them to find employment outside of traditional roles.

In light of Bourdieu's concept of cultural reproduction, the meaning and purpose of education within Islamic institutions (Madaris) diverge significantly from those of secular education systems. For female students, Islamic education is emphasized as a moral and spiritual framework, aimed at instilling values of obedience and preparing them for success in both the earthly and the afterlife realms. This education is seen as the exclusive means to achieve a righteous life and attain ‘jannah’ (paradise), which is often regarded as the ultimate human goal. Secular education, conversely, is dismissed by the Muhtamims (religious administrators) as irrelevant and worldly. Despite Quranic exhortations to seek knowledge and "contemplate the wonders of creation" (Quran 3:191), secular subjects, including scientific disciplines, are treated with deep suspicion by the Muhtamims in female Madaris. These institutions, deeply embedded in Pakhtoon cultural traditions, focus predominantly on teachings aligned with patriarchal values, disregarding broader intellectual pursuits. In this context, they play a central role in the reproduction of patriarchal norms.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, the curriculum in these Madaris can be seen as a mechanism of cultural reproduction, deliberately structured to perpetuate the existing social order. The content is intentionally confined to religious instruction, enabling the Muhtamims to shape the students' worldview in a way that aligns with the male-dominated societal structures. According to Bourdieu's theory of class reproduction, education serves not only to perpetuate class structures but also to transmit the dominant cultural codes and practices, reinforcing societal hierarchies. This study illustrates that the Madaris do not merely reproduce a specific class of women; they also reproduce traditional, patriarchal social structures. The rejection of secular education

reflects a broader effort to sustain these structures by preventing the introduction of alternative worldviews that could challenge the established gender roles. The Muhtamims are particularly concerned that secular education might mislead women, diverting them from their prescribed roles within the home and society, thus threatening the stability of the patriarchal order they seek to preserve.

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