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Book Review: *Questioning the 'Muslim Woman': Identity and Insecurity in an Urban Indian Locality*

Aatina N. Malik

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***Questioning the 'Muslim Woman': Identity and Insecurity in an Urban Indian Locality*, Nida Kirmani, 2013. Routledge, India. 246 pp. ₹.695.**

Reviewed by
Aatina N. Malik¹

Nida Kirmani's work challenges the category of 'Indian Muslims' in general and 'Muslim Women' in particular as a product of colonial and postcolonial discourses that look at them as homogenous entities. 'Muslim Women', she argues are studied only as a sub-group of 'Indian Muslim Community' owing to the Orientalist and the Feminist approaches. She attacks the way Muslim women are talked about just in terms of religion i.e. Purdah, Muslim Personal Law or the associated social problems and are thus, projected as victims who are waiting to be rescued. She also brings forth the concern that the scholarship on Muslim women is bereft of their own voices, leaving a lot of gaps in understanding their situation on ground. Her work is thus, based on de-centering the "Muslim Women" which does not mean that she rejects the importance of religion and gender in their identity formation rather understands their significance in juxtaposition with other identities along with the contextual knowledge. For Kirmani, identity is not a static or fixed thing; rather identity formation is a process, i.e. it is always in the making. Moving beyond the understanding of Muslim women as a unified category with Islam as the defining factor of their lives, she locates them at the intersection of gender, family and community within the context of polity and economy. She also transcends the victimization of these women and highlights how they negotiate through and around various constraints based on their social location. The book is about multiple identifications of these women, which are relational as well as shifting.

The book is a product of almost 10 months of field work in the Zakir Nagar area of south Delhi which has developed as a post partition neighborhood with migrants coming in from old-Delhi and other parts of India. It is based on informal and loosely structured interviews with the residents of this area especially women of varying class, caste, marital status, educational qualifications and employment status. The book is divided into eight chapters and each chapter presents the understanding of construction, de-construction and reconstruction of identities via people's narratives of their lives, locality and others (pg. 194).

In the initial chapters specifically chapter 2 and 3, the author argues that looking at Zakir Nagar as a "muslim mohalla" overshadows the other identities which contribute to the making of neighborhood. She brings forth how it is not only a religious segregation but internally also the place is segregated on the basis of class, occupation and caste. Through people's narratives of locality and neighborhood, there is a conflation of religion and culture and although '*muslim mahol*' is quite dominant marked by the presence of multiple markers like mosques, *burqa* clad women or a range of non-vegetarian eateries this *mahol* is privileged differently based on class and gender positions. Borrowing from Swidler's (1986) concept of 'culture as a toolkit' she explains how people pick and choose ideas as they see fit. For example, middle class is living there because they want to be religiously upright and acquaint their kids with the teachings of Islam whereas the lower class Muslims are more concerned about trying to make their ends meet and are

¹ Aatina N. Malik is a PhD Scholar in the Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi.

living in *jhuggis* (shacks) in Zakir Nagar because it is an affordable place. So, the importance of *muslim mahol* is quite prevalent in the lives of middle class than the *jhuggi* dwellers, thus, challenging the category of unified Indian Muslim.

In the intermediate chapters, Chapter 4 and 5, the author addresses the concerns of insecurity in this area which is a result of combination of multiple factors including animosity towards Muslims by the Hindus, events of communal violence, growing urbanization and lack of development. Insecurity therefore, is not only along the lines of religion but economic and sexual (in case of women) as well, based on various and shifting others. The author argues that there is a changing and shifting nature of boundaries vis-à-vis the 'other' and the 'other' here is not only the 'Hindu other', but also, the 'Muslim other' belonging to a different class, region or educational background. The porous and persistent nature of these boundaries vis-à-vis the 'other' depends upon one's class, caste, education and employment status and is not solely a religious phenomenon as is perceived in the dominant discourses.

Chapter 6 and 7 disturb the category of 'Muslim women' by going beyond the dichotomous debates that on one side have *ulemas* as protectors of Islam and on the other side have the supporters of woman's rights. The author instead delves deeper to explore the real life concerns and negotiations of these women and specifies that we cannot talk about their everyday in terms of binaries of 'oppression' or 'free will' alone. For example, she argues that there is no agreement as to what constitutes a Muslim dress and veiling for example, is seen as a part of the cultural toolkit which women pick and choose depending upon their understanding and negotiation of occasion, security and location based largely on their social position. Veil thus, has multiple interpretations varying from being a privilege, instrument of safety, tool of mobility, patriarchal dominance and so on. Similarly, there are varied interpretations of Muslim personal law, *talaq*, (divorce) and other social problems depending upon the way they resonate with these women's lives. It is very interesting to see how the intersections of religion, class, region, family, marriage and education determine the way women articulate constraints and choices.

The beauty of the work lies in its intricacies to understand a supposedly homogenous category called 'Muslim Women'. The book, as the author argues, is a part of the feminist project that approaches women as 'actors' rather than 'victims' of patriarchy. It gives space to Muslim women's voices in social and political issues where usually men's voices are privileged. Evoking Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of 'patriarchal bargain' and 'cyclic nature of power' it reflects how patriarchy in itself is not unified and how the power to negotiate varies as per the woman's socio-economic position, thus, transgressing the so-called dominance of religion in the Muslim women's lives. The book is ethnographically rich and weaves a narrative in the light of historic, developmental, religious, communal and gendered discourses, thus, giving us a multi layered and a multi-vocal understanding of Muslims of Zakir Nagar in general and Muslim women of Zakir Nagar in particular.

The book, although, is an important contribution to understand the lives of Muslim women in Zakir Nagar but it pays no attention to the sectarian divergence in Islam which is very likely to determine the extent to which religion influences the lives of these women. Also, when the author talks about the lives and choices of women in Zakir Nagar, we hardly see any discussion about the men's perception and views on the same. We do not get a sense that if men in Zakir Nagar think differently or are in line with what the women are thinking and choosing for themselves. Such intervention, I believe, would open up a whole set of new insights and debates making this work more nuanced.