
Listening to Muslim Women

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Two discourses about Muslims loom large in India's imagination, points out Ghazala Jamil. One stream of literature is consumed by the image of "Islamic" fundamentalism and terrorism, while the other is intrigued by Muslims' poor record on socio-developmental indices. "The centering of the Muslim men is common to both kinds of discourses," she notes. What about Muslim women? Why do we only hear of them in relation to their victimisation at the hands of Muslim men?

Muslim Women Speak: Of Dreams and Shackles is as much on the apparent silence of Muslim women as it is on the research practices that further this silence. Jamil's book has been published at a time when discourses on the Muslim women are in a state of flux. In 2018, Parliament criminalised *Triple Talaq* despite the Supreme Court having struck it down as unconstitutional the year before. Importantly, the Prime Minister and the larger right-wing ecosystem in India spoke of it in a language that implied them to be heroic rescuers of miserable Muslim women from the clutches of the beastly Muslim men. While reports of several Muslim women benefiting from the new law have emerged,¹ one only needs to look at the government's response to the recent women-led anti-national register of citizens and Constitutional (Amendment) Act protests to understand that Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) concern for the Muslim woman stops when there is no chance to demonise Muslim men.

The problem is that in the public sphere the Indian Muslim women's voice is merged, dissolved, and thus, lost in the Muslim male voice, while the Muslim male voice is effectively silenced except when it is raised to curtail Muslim women's rights and freedom. (p 98)

However, it is not just the state. "Muslim women hushed quiet by communal violence, poverty, domestic violence, illiteracy, lack of economically viable

BOOK REVIEWS

Muslim Women Speak: Of Dreams and Shackles

by Ghazala Jamil, *New Delhi, California, London and Singapore: Sage Publications and New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2018; pp xxiv + 190, ₹595.*

skills are rendered further 'voiceless' by those who study them" Jamil notes. She says that while the interest in research undertaken on Muslim societies has grown manifold in the last few years, "the narratives they produce are not always edifying, an examination of Muslim women and their conditions is conspicuous by its near complete absence from these narratives" (p 5). Unlike several works on Muslim women, Jamil's work is conscious of the researcher's gaze on a marginalised group. By doing this, it makes reflexivity about the process a fundamental part of the research. Muslim women are often talked about in academic work, but rarely do they speak themselves. Why is the Muslim woman silent? Jamil's work puts a microscope to the enterprise of social research, especially the manner in which fieldwork is conceived and conducted, and nudges us to pay attention to the various steps of research, and how it shapes discourses about the communities that are studied: from the collection and (re)creation of data in research, to how silence and inarticulation of disempowered women can be perceived. Jamil uses unconventional and hybrid methodologies.

The book was initially conceived as a quantifiable study of Muslim girls' aspirations. Commissioned by the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan and supported by ActionAid, it planned to "capture and document the aspirations of the girls" as well as to "compile and analyse the socio-economic and educational status of these girls." Jamil was given a detailed questionnaire for the massive data collection, the responses of which would later be statistically analysed.

What percentage of girls aspired to be teachers, doctors, and engineers? Something felt amiss in this approach. Arguing that they rethink the methods with which a group of marginalised people are studied, Jamil focused on creating a space where Muslim women could articulate their desires. This has made the resultant book unlike other books on Muslim women.

Documenting Aspirations

The book uses a lot of rich autobiographical notes to help us wade through different topics that concern Muslim women: the everyday of inhabiting margins, of dreaming in shackles, of structural violence, etc. Each chapter contains a multitude of short quotes by several women across the country. The book records young Muslim women in 23 urban and semi-urban clusters in 12 states, including Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. In one of the workshops, participants were asked to articulate their life story using the metaphor of a river. Participants were asked to imagine their own life in the flow of a river touched and shaped by and affecting the banks of a private family life and social events. "While positive research uses people as guinea pigs to generate an 'objective understanding' of a social phenomenon," Jamil argues, "narratives heal as they explore and bring to the fore feelings and emotions that the narrator may not have articulated to herself prior to the research experience" (p 27).

Through approaches like these, Jamil makes the case for research being transformative. Are the poor and marginalised researched because they are "easily researchable" or because the research has the potential of being a liberatory moment for them? "There is no reason," Jamil asserts "why *concientização*, a process that brings to the oppressed the conviction to struggle for her own liberation, cannot be one of the objectives of research." In the words of a respondent:

When we came for this meeting, so many questions were asked of us. How was our life earlier, if anything has changed, what

do we want from the future and other such questions. I got an opportunity to voice my desires. We got to know about each other. My heart got some solace in the meeting. I would like to come again.

Patriarchy and Communalism

Jamil offers new insights into how patriarchy and communalism intersect in Muslim women's lives. Many of the girls experienced restricted mobility after their families suffered through communal violence. Several of them had to drop out of school. But most pertinently, Jamil reiterates how the shared Muslim experience of communal hatred restricts Muslim women from questioning patriarchy in their families. The author challenges notions of universal "sisterhood" when she asserts that

the common experience of communal discrimination along with violence (or the anticipation of violence) binds Muslim women and Muslim men together more strongly than the common experience of patriarchy binds Hindu women and Muslim women.

Quoting bell hooks, Jamil brings out an intriguing point about how feminism looks at men: "Women with class privilege have been the only group who have perpetuated the notion that men are all-powerful, because often the men in their families were powerful." In contrast, marginalised women are aware of the emotional pain and the work dissatisfactions of their men.

The media attention post the assault of Jyoti Singh led to a new era of feminism in the country where core demands of mainstream feminist movement were acknowledged and heard. But the effect of this, for Jamil, has been the strengthening of the "hegemonic tendencies in what is essentially a movement of upper class, upper caste Hindu women, posturing as 'secular feminism.'" Thus, the structural violence faced by Dalit and Muslim women are not addressed. A girl in the book says:

If I choose to not see it I won't see it but when I look carefully, I see that all around me are the after-effects of violence. Of course, people lose work, property, things, but the loss of education, mental health are no less important. Poverty makes people weak. Boys, men are under so much mental stress. Without any reason the police would drag them out of their homes and beat them. I know in Jogeshwari women used to wear many clothes one over the another in their attempt to

deter rapists. With my own eyes I have seen the local leader assure us in the day but attack us later at night. From Dharavi children were sent to stay with relatives who lived in Muslim areas. Young men were picked up by the police so they were told to go away to the native villages, run away anywhere. (p 97)

Irfan Ahmad and Md Zakaria Siddiqui analysed data from Prison Statistics India from 1998 to 2014 in their paper, "Democracy in Jail: Over-representation of Minorities in Indian Prisons" published in the *Economic & Political Weekly*. In comparison to their percentage in the total population, Scheduled Tribes (sts), Scheduled Castes (scs), and amidst minorities, Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs are all well over-represented in Indian prisons. Muslims are even more disproportionately represented than scs and sts. Notably, three-fourths of Muslim inmates are non-convicts—undertrial or detainee. In Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, more than 80% of Muslim prisoners are non-convicts.

By raising the state's treatment of Muslim men as an issue that directly concerns the agency of Muslim women, Jamil questions how mainstream feminism has framed its problems. The tragedy of the situation, however, as Jamil rightly notes, is that while Muslim women have extended their "care" to empathise with their men, Muslim men have "failed to return the courtesy."

Poverty

Widespread poverty and the lack of opportunities are apparent. Many narratives hold limited finances at the disposal of the family as a major impediment to realising the young girls' aspirations.

I want to stand on my own feet but I think would not be able to fulfil my dream as I belong to a Muslim family. I want to become a software engineer but due to financial problems I would not be able to fulfil my dream. (p 76)

Earlier I used to study ... after we moved to Mumbai my parents could not arrange for me to go to school. I had to drop out. Here water and electricity are always in short supply. Most people are unemployed. There is garbage everywhere. The stink awful and bothers people living around here, but no one has the guts to take any action. (p 63)

While the book deeply explores the Muslim experience of backwardness, and constantly hints at caste, it misses

out on a fuller discussion on intergenerational mobility and caste. Thus, even as the subjects of the book clearly come across as women who belong to the lower castes, the author's reluctance on directly addressing caste among Muslims affects insights one could have drawn from the book. Caste is the ultimate organising principle of South Asia and one that affects Muslim lives as well (around 70%–85% of Muslims are lower caste by different estimates). Jamil mentions the presence of caste in Muslims in her literature review, but does not return to it to use it as an analytic to place the lives of these women. It is pertinent that none of the women's narratives mentions caste either. But one wonders whether a more perceptive framework (including the questions asked to the women) could have changed this. One also feels that an Ambedkarite lens could have given a better perspective to understand the lives of these women—particularly to contextualise structural violence in India—than that provided by scholars like Henri Lefebvre, Jürgen Habermans, John Galtung, etc.

The book makes a stylistic choice of clubbing several narratives in a chapter, one after the other, without identifying each quote with a name or the place it comes from. While the withholding of names might have been an ethical choice, the absence of any other sort of marker in the narratives deters any insights based on age and region.

Jamil's book is a unique repository of narratives of many Muslim women. Apart from taking on some of the most spoken about subjects like patriarchy, violence, and lack of education, the book also manages to touch upon some gentle topics, such as the idea of leisure and the relationship of mothers and daughters. The book is an interesting read for a peek into thoughts, desires, and worries of young Muslim women of India.

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NOTE

- 1 Details can be accessed at <https://scroll.in/article/935235/i-just-want-to-see-him-in-jail-muslim-women-are-using-the-new-triple-talq-law-to-get-justice>.