

Questions of a Muslim Mother

Review – Farah Farooqi

Mothering a Muslim: the Dark Secret in our Schools and Playgrounds

By Nazia Erum

Juggernaut Books, New Delhi, 2018, 220 pp., Rs 399

ISBN 978-93-8622-853-6

While reading *Mothering a Muslim* I kept thinking about how easily I could substitute my own journey of growing up as a Muslim and my mothering experiences with those in the book because they find an echo in the lived experiences of millions of urban, middle-class Indian Muslims. The book begins with a dilemma that the author, fashion professional Nazia Erum, faced when she became a mother in 2014: whether giving her child a Muslim-sounding name might expose her to different kinds of fears and threats. She settled for the name Myra – one which she felt would not be easily associated with Muslims.

This book is a Muslim mother's attempt to understand whether her fears had any sound basis or whether her responses were similar to all mothers trying to shield their children. As she says in her Introduction, "I wanted to know whether a Muslim mother's worries were any different from that of her Hindu, Christian or Sikh counterparts. What were the challenges that were exclusively hers?" In her attempt to understand, Erum reached out to 145

families across 12 Indian cities and spent about a year documenting the mothering experiences of urban, educated Muslim women like herself, who were missing from the media-driven discourse. Though a very diverse cross section, comprising a university lecturer, a member of Parliament, an activist, a IT professional, a *shayara*, a civil rights advocate, a *naqab*-wearing gynaecologist, a homemaker, a district-level swimmer, etc, they all had a similar story to share: of their children facing communal bullying at school from peers, teachers and the administration.

The narratives in first section of the book [The Muslims are coming] may startle some. Here, we read about a five-year-old child, during a car journey with her Muslim parents, being scared stiff on seeing Muslim men in their traditional attire pour out of a mosque after the weekly Friday prayers. The parents wonder when and where the little one, who had just started school, had internalised fears related to such images.

Erum elicits detailed responses from respondents and extensively includes their experiences in the book, often in the form of direct talk. This makes the book even more powerful.

In one of the sections [The elephant in the schools] Erum talks about the rampant labelling of Muslim children in schools and neighbourhoods. More than 90 per cent of the children interviewed have been called 'Pakis', 'Pakistanis' or 'terrorists'! A mother relates an incident where while dividing teams children put her seven-year-old son on the 'Pakistani' side. She says,

"My son was offended and started shouting, "No, I am not Pakistani!" I was deeply shocked at the deep demarcations. I told the boys that they can instead make teams based on IPL ones." (p 60)

She mentions a Noida school where a child was taunted in front of the class teacher by a classmate, “What did you do, Saad?” referring to a bombing incident which had happened the previous day. According to the respondents, while such incidents predated 2014, when Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party-led majoritarian government came to power, they have become more widespread since that year, a result of how Hindu communal attitudes have intensified during this period.

As I read this book, I recalled my school days and those of my siblings in the late 1970s and ’80s in similar schools of South Delhi. I was in Class IV in 1978-79 when I lied to my friends that I was not Muslim. Does this mean that time has stood still for us Muslims? After all, our children and we have encountered the same type of stereotypical labelling in schools. I wish someone would study of how stereotypes have changed over time. This may enhance our understanding of how socio-political changes in society affect our cognitive processes and attitudes. Do prejudices and attitudes die out with changes in socio-political contexts or do they mutate and adapt to new social contexts?

Erum holds a mirror to the so-called highly educated urban middle-class families who send their children to study in elite schools. Raiqa Saulat Khan, a woman from an aristocratic family of Bhopal, had sent her son Faizan to Daly College in Indore in accordance with the family tradition. Faizan’s dorm mates ganged up against him, calling him ‘Pakistani’ and ‘terrorist’. The child was so distraught that he had to be withdrawn from the school and admitted to a local one in Bhopal. To Raiqa’s dismay, in his new school, Faizan made only Muslim friends. By highlighting these contradictions of Indian modernity, Erum shows how prejudiced we are as a society. As I read the narratives, the

recent lynchings of Akhlaque, Junaid, Pahlu Khan and many others in the name of cow protection came alive before my eyes. I could understand how at the slightest provocation simmering religious hatreds could burst into gruesome violence.

Can our schools help us become a secular, anti-essentialist society through critical and open debates?

It is disturbing that most parents don't find the courage to report the matter of communal bullying to the teachers or the administration. Many a time the children too don't share their torment with their parents and gradually learn to cope on their own. I remembered how, as a student of Class II, my brother was beaten up by his peers after the school reopened following the anti-Sikh violence of 1984. His teacher proclaimed that Hindus and Sikhs were 'brethren' and therefore they should not fight, and that the real enemies were the Muslims. The children then beat up the 'enemy' in front of the teacher! What remains an unanswered question is why my parents, both highly educated professionals, did not approach the school or complain about the teacher.

This school is mentioned in the list of schools given by the author where her respondent's children study. The world has not changed! What kind of emotional scars does such demonisation and violence leave on children's hearts and minds? What is the result of such alienation on the community and the society at large? Such questions need to be examined with greater empathy and rigour. It needs to be recognised that the taunts and discrimination are factors for the glaring drop-out rates amongst Muslim

children, as pointed out by the Sachar Committee Report (2006) on the condition of Muslims in the country.

Erum's documentation helps to unearth the systemic 'othering' of Muslims as well. For example, in places such as Bhopal, where there is a sizeable Muslim presence, Urdu is offered alongside Sanskrit as a third language. In schools here students end up getting divided not just into class sections based on the opted languages but also on religious lines. Many of my own students of Jamia Millia Islamia university in New Delhi interning with schools reported language segregated sections being referred to as 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' classes even by the teachers. The children in the Urdu sections are looked down upon as trouble-makers. This segregation in schools needs to be seen against the backdrop of the contemporary social setting in which people from dominant religious groups barely have any experiential knowledge of Muslims, because Muslims are condemned to ghettoisation and mixed-group localities are relatively rare. The representation of different communities in the government schools even in metropolises like Delhi remains lopsided. Since Muslims are socio-economically backward, their numbers in 'good' private schools with cosmopolitan values remain poor.

Many more research studies are needed to explore the interplay of prejudices, stereotyping and labelling leading to ghettoisation and marginalisation of individuals and communities. The respondents of *Mothering a Muslim* are from educated urban Muslim families living in socio-religiously mixed localities. Not enough work has been done on the experiences of Muslims in general and those of Muslim workers living in ghettos. It is also important to

explore the experiences of rural Muslims. This will help in understanding the cases of recent protracted violence against Muslims in such areas.

Erum discusses how self-censorship has crept into the lives of the Muslim community (p 57). She enumerates how Muslim families discourage their children from wearing traditional clothes and are on guard in public places such as airports. This is how people fall in line through devices of panoptic surveillance – the modern techniques of punishment. Later Erum discusses, rightly, how Muslim-ness is forced upon people as a primary identity - an identity through which the rest of the identities are perceived. The Muslim parents' anxieties related to their children getting influenced by radical groups such as ISIS has been also highlighted.

An interesting irony the book highlights is that while Muslims have to keep reiterating their nationalism for the world at large - Erum herself points out that she comes from a family of freedom-fighters who funded India's revolt against the British in 1857 for which they were hanged in her hometown Allahabad - many Muslims are not accepted by their own community for not being Muslim enough. Erum discusses how people returning from Wahabi Saudi Arabia have become increasingly conservative and think that they alone are following 'pure' Islam. Celebrating the idea of India in the Epilogue, Erum urges all to recognise the challenges posed by the twin evils of bigotry and rigidity. This religious and cultural assertion, however, is much more complex and has to be understood in the light of global and national politics and related socio-economic changes.

Lucidly written, insightful and hard-hitting, Nazia Erum's *Mothering a Muslim* is a timely and necessary documentation that should be essential reading not

just in schools and other educational institutions but also in law schools, police training institutes and other state-run and civil society organisations. An important thing which marks off the book from those written by “academics” is that the author allows the respondents to make sense of their social realities and circumstances themselves. She restrains from undue analysis which, at times, objectifies the respondents!!

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