

Duroos:
Religious Lessons and Muslim Women

“Why are no Muslims speaking up, reclaiming their “religion of peace” that has been hijacked by extremists who have rendered it a religion of violence?” “Why is there a sense of complacency and stagnancy in Islam and among Muslims?” These are familiar questions asked by the White House and mimicked by every news network around the United States. “Islam is in need of reform” and “Muslim women are in need of liberation” are blanket statements that have gained common currency through a spectrum of voices and perspectives. With books lamenting the “Trouble With Islam” and so-called experts extolling the virtues of exporting democracy and freedom to a people we are told are in desperate need of “liberation” from their governments, or in the case of their women, from their men, the propelling of a discourse that carefully conceals its ignorance of tangible grievances and realities, through a series of faulty questions and statements, has gained significant ground. A search party has been formed for “moderate” Muslims, armed with flashlights and Bernard Lewis’s words of wisdom, and Muslim women have been notified of their pending liberation through “Hi” magazine and increased security concerns. This is not to argue that many of these concerns are either wholly unfounded or unsubstantiated, but rather, that they are addressed in a manner that is more conducive to the questioners than to those who would seemingly benefit from the answers.

Though in vogue, in asking these popular questions and reiterating these popular refrains, many are belying their own ingenuousness by demonstrating their nonchalance

toward searching for real answers and solutions. Their views admit a superficial look into Islam, for if engaged in any real attempt or mission to enhance the lives of Muslims globally, they would begin by asking the right questions and actually looking in the right places for the right answers. For if one takes a closer look, the proliferation of discourse and prevalence of dialogue within the Muslim community itself is astonishing. Perhaps nowhere is Islam being reinterpreted, renegotiated, and rejuvenated than among Muslims themselves. Muslim women in particular are posing their own inquiries, explanations, and resolutions, are listening to and debating one another on matters of religion, and coming to terms with their own sense of self, as well as their continuing appearance as an other. *Duroos*, or religious lessons, being sponsored and attended by these women, are an excellent example of the manifestation of debate and search for knowledge and growth occurring within the Muslim community. They are an outstanding demonstration of how the reformulation of questions and methods regarding Islam can yield more acceptable, practical, and positive consequences. Instead of asking where the “moderates” are, maybe we need to reexamine where we are looking and to whom we have been listening.

Duroos are an expression of the female Muslim community that challenge the discourses of both the silent Muslim community and of the oppressed Muslim woman. Through the organization of groups for women by women, demonstrating initiative, organization, and independence, *duroos* are promoting spiritual growth, personal responsibility and accountability, an increased understanding of Islam, the acquisition of a sense of agency, and the formation of therapeutic and informal female networks, with positive consequences for participants as well as the larger Muslim community. Through their mere existence as options, opportunities, and alternatives, they are challenging the

hegemonic patriarchal Islamic discourse in less than obvious ways and are examples of social change that may be achieved through individuals. As individuals engaged in a conscious, concerted, and relatively sustained effort to change some aspect of their society and themselves by using extrainstitutional means, they are active participants in a social movement of sorts, according to James Jasper. They are engaging in discourses and practices designed to challenge and even change society as *they* define it, with their ultimate goals and actual transformations varying from group to group. Though analysis of the discourse of the duroos through a thorough look at the sources being utilized, topics under discussion, and questions of authenticity and immutability, yields debatable results, the existence of a forum that allows women to choose their own discourse and to determine the framework of their debate, bearing significant benefits for the women involved and through their own efforts, their families and community, is in itself a challenge to a patriarchal order that has for too long made those decisions and determinations for women.

In attempting to convey an introductory look at duroos through the lens of one dars in particular which I have been attending on a regular basis, a brief look at duroos in general is vital. Further, it is imperative to include a note both on my methodology, as well the politics of representation involved in any ethnographic approach through the participant/observer process. Only by situating my dars within its larger context, as well as understanding how I have drawn my conclusions, will their ultimate validity and utility become legitimate concerns.

Duroos in General

Translated from Arabic as “lessons,” the word *duroos* has usually referred to lessons or classes within an academic context. Generally, the word does not denote any specific subject matter, nor does it evoke a particular notion of attendee, topic, or context, but rather, is loosely associated with an educational setting. More recently, however, the word is used throughout the Muslim community, particularly the female Muslim community, to denote religious lessons. Such lessons are usually conducted at an individual’s home, are held on a regular basis, are led by a female “teacher” and in most cases attended entirely by women. The *duroos* may be held weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, etc. according to the preference of those in attendance, but are generally held on a regular basis. Each meeting may also take place at a different location as many of the *duroos* operate on a rotating basis, with each attendee offering her home as the location for a lesson, so as not to exhaust one particular host on a regular basis. Additionally, there are *duroos* that are held at the same home consistently, with the home usually being that of the woman conducting the *dars*. Obviously, there are no set rules and regulations, as most of the norms governing the conducting of the *duroos* are dictated by those participating. There is additionally no distinct or obvious character sketch of either the women who conduct the lessons or of those who attend. An outward religiosity is neither a prerequisite for attendance nor an immediate indicator of the “type” of woman in attendance. Those leading the lesson, however, are believed to have some sort of religious credibility, though the terms and factors of such credibility are debatable and open to discussion. Again, there are no clear-cut requirements other than a firm

understanding of Islam and an ability and willingness to communicate said knowledge to others.

Though literally translated as “lesson” (dars) or “lessons” (duroos), the terms are misleading in that they imply a concrete student/teacher relationship, which is not always entirely the case. Though the presence of a “leader” is immediately obvious and the dars is generally organized by and around her, the meetings are in no way restricted to a lecture with no discussion. On the contrary, dialogue and debate are an integral part of the duroos. While one woman may lead the discussion and present the group with a lecture or lesson plan of sorts, she may be, and is, frequently interrupted by the comments, questions, and anecdotes of others. Though generally the most religiously knowledgeable of the women, the words of the dars leader are in no way set in stone, and others do not hesitate to share their own information and understanding of issues. This has been the case with most of the duroos I have been made aware of, though there are of course exceptions to the majority that do not necessarily operate in this manner. Authority, in these cases, may be invested in one and only one woman, where the meetings resemble, in university terms, a unilateral lecture rather than a seminar. Dissent may not be tolerated or accepted, and those in attendance may immediately take the leader’s word as ultimate truth, even in light of their own previous religious background or understanding. Duroos of this nature, however, are by no means the norm, and do not set the standards for others.

The proliferation of duroos throughout the Muslim community in the United States and abroad is worthy of note. There is an abundance of lessons to choose from, held by an innumerable amount of individuals, so that it is not unreasonable to meet a

Muslim woman who attends or has attended a dars, or at least knows someone who has. In fact, it is not uncommon for one person to attend several different lessons with several different women, so that a virtual “network of duroos” is formed. Though the concepts of religiously knowledgeable women, of female religious education occurring outside of the formal spheres, and of women forming groups to educate one another, are by no means novel, the duroos trend is significant and worthy of scholarship for several reasons. First, it is occurring among the female Muslim community simultaneously around the world, and has been for at least the last ten years. Second, it has scarcely been written about or addressed, remaining virtually unnoticed or misunderstood. Further, its potential for an actual production of tangible consequences for its participants and the larger Muslim community can hardly be ignored. Lastly, its operation within a global context in which Islam and Muslims have served as fodder for interests across the spectrum is illuminating. While these duroos are occurring across the global Muslim community, with different reasons and consequences attending each context, it is the duroos taking place in the United States, and more specifically, a particular dars taking place in the Washington DC Metropolitan Area that garners attention here.

Note on Methodology

At the outset, it is important to note that both my interest in, and knowledge of, duroos in general have been cultivated through the dars in particular which I have been attending on a regular basis for approximately six months. Many of the qualities attributed to duroos in broad terms have in fact been concluded through my attendance of this specific dars, as well as a general knowledge of duroos being held by other women elsewhere in the United States and abroad. My observations and conclusions are a result

of the regular attendance of the dars-some sessions of which were tape-recorded, and interviews with both the dars “leader” and a few participants who were each presented with questions I had prepared in advance, culminating in my own personal notes recorded after each dars. I have subsequently relied on these resources as a foundation for my cursory introduction of contemporary duroos.

In recognizing that my knowledge of duroos has been formed primarily through one dars, I do not wish to imply a uniformity among all duroos nor to force any form of homogeneity upon them. I am simply using the experience as an example of the potential research pool, and as a platform for further research. I am fully cognizant of the utility of using details and the particulars of individual lives to produce typifications. According to Lila Abu-Lughod, generalizations can make “others” seem simultaneously more coherent and self-contained, allowing for the fixing of boundaries between self and other. It is important to be weary of generalizations for, as part of a discourse of objectivity and expertise, it is inevitably a language of power. It is the language of those who seem to stand apart from, and outside of, what they are describing. Second, by producing the effects of homogenization and the erasure of time and struggle, this is misleading because it makes what is inside the external boundary set up by homogenization seem essential and fixed. This paper simply seeks to take a closer look at duroos through the lens of one particular dars.

I have attended the dars as both a participant and an observer and it is crucial to recognize this element in the subsequent discussion. As a Muslim woman eager to participate in the networks being formed, the discussions taking place, and the knowledge gained, I listen and participate, as would any other woman involved in the weekly lesson.

I come eager to learn and willing to share as an equal, though somewhat younger, member of the group. To my knowledge, however, I am the only one who intends to use the dars as an avenue for other, external discussions, or who has made the decision to write about them early into my experience as a participant, allotting to me an observer status to some extent. I attend each dars with one ear to the internal discourse and dialogue taking place each week among the women, and one ear to the external larger context within which what is taking place may later be summarized and situated. Primarily the only young woman to attend the dars, and to my knowledge, the only one approaching it through both an academic and feminist perspective, in addition to the religious, I occupy a unique position in relation to my fellow participants; a position that cannot be ignored in relation to conclusions I have drawn.

Accordingly, the inevitability of positionality must be recognized. According to Abu-Lughod, a story is always situated; it has both a teller and an audience. Its perspective is partial and its telling is motivated. In a similar vein, Simone de Beauvoir's first lesson of feminist analysis is that relations, or more accurately, constructions of self and other are rarely innocent of power. To be feminist entails being sensitive to domination. Feminist work has thus encouraged a heightened consciousness of two issues- standpoint and the power dynamics of self and other, otherwise known as the "politics of representation." A difference between self and other will always be hierarchical because the self is sensed as primary, self-formed, active, and complex, if not positive. At the very least, the self is always the interpreter and the other the interpreted. We have learned to be suspicious of claims about the transparency of texts and the capacity of representations to mirror reality. No less than any other ethnography, this

paper involves analysis and is shaped by the questions asked and the point of view taken. It presents as all ethnographies do, a “partial truth.” Nonetheless, taking note of Abu-Lughod’s methodology in *Writing Women’s Worlds, Bedouin Stories*, I have not shied away from leaving traces of myself throughout. I have sought a presence somewhere between the extremes of total erasure of myself and the imposition of my presence as an equal participant. It is with all this in mind that I have pursued the presentation of duroos, their potential for social change on an individual basis, and their challenge to hegemonic discourses both external and internal to the Muslim community.

DC Area Dars

For approximately six months, I have attended a dars in the Washington DC area. The dars is held every Thursday at 7:30 pm on a rotating basis, so that it takes place at a different woman’s home each week. Most of the women live in either Virginia or Maryland and carpool to the home usually designated a week in advance so that arrangements on behalf of both the hostess and attendees can be made. There is no designated order to the rotation as it is solely based on the volunteering of the women, though there is an attempt made to alternate between Virginia and Maryland homes.

Attendees range from ten to fifteen each week, with only slight variation in the form of new and old attendees, though new participants are welcomed and encouraged. The majority of the women are middle-aged, aside from myself and another occasional young woman. Most are Egyptian, with the exception of one Lebanese and one Syrian woman, both of whom are married to Egyptians. Though initially appearing as an Egyptian phenomenon, this is by no means the case, but is rather a function of social networks and my relative familiarity with and access to them. There are, in fact, duroos

taking places within the larger Muslim community among numerous groups of women, traversing ethnic and regional categories. Due to family and social associations, one of the duroos occurring among primarily Egyptian women was readily accessible. The majority are wives, mothers, and working women, which is why the dars takes place in the evenings, unlike other “teatime” duroos that meet during the day. They are all highly educated, having completed at least a bachelor’s degree, with a lawyer, doctor, engineer, and entrepreneur among them to name a few examples. While the women who attend this particular dars may be considered middle to upper-middle class, there is no particular class of women associated with duroos in general in the United States. Any given dars may encompass a wide spectrum of class affiliations, alongside ethnic and regional affiliations. Many duroos include participants who have newly converted to Islam, those who attend at the behest of friends, and those who are involved in the larger social network of which many of the dars participants are connected to. The affiliations of the women who participate in the dars are more likely to determine dars composition by way of class, ethnicity, and locality, than any other factor. Some of the women wear hijab while others do not, so that the dars is about evenly divided among those who wear it and those who do not, though all come prepared with a scarf in order to pray Salat-al-Ishaa(evening prayer) together. Many of the women are extremely knowledgeable regarding Islam, while others are essentially in their earliest phases of learning. Most of the women are the first in their families to immigrate to the United States, and thus have acquired the majority of their education, with the possible exclusion of higher education, in the Middle East. Though having been raised in the Arab world, most if not all of the women lament the paltry religious education they received through school, maintaining

that besides the basic pillars of the faith and stories of the life of the Prophet, peace be upon him, they were not taught much else. Most have furthered their understanding of Islam thus far through family and personal research. For many, the sparseness of their knowledge has for one reason or another begun to weigh heavily upon them, so that they attend the duroos eager to compensate for lost time and knowledge. When asked to describe the lessons, one woman shed light on some of the reasons that her and others may be drawn to the lessons by volunteering the following information:

“People go because they want to learn more. Growing up, I didn’t learn much and I wasn’t taught much. I knew haram and halal, but nothing else really. I’ve learned about my religion and myself, and how to deal with others. If it wasn’t for the lessons...and I think a lot of people are like that. And it’s nice to learn with others-some people will get books and tapes and listen on their own, but the group feeling is wonderful. It’s like learning a new subject.”

It is interesting to note the context within which this, and other duroos, are taking place. Though this context vacillates between the relative sense of stability and security that the immigrant Muslim community in the Washington DC area has grown accustomed to, and the precarious situation of late they have found themselves shifted to in light of events globally, there is of necessity a connection between the dars and the background against which it operates and with which it interacts. In noting the maturity of the Muslim community in the Washington DC area, and its substantial assimilation into the local community, there may also be an accompanying perception of the loss of an individual and authentic Muslim identity, especially in regards to those women who are active participants in the non-Muslim arena through work or school. In finding themselves, perhaps slightly too entrenched or absorbed by their larger context, the

women find comfort in their “local” Muslim context through the dars. In a similar vein, they have carved out a niche that is catered exclusively by them and for them, conceivably in order to use the platform as a home base of sorts that will allow them the flexibility of moving in and out of the contexts within which they operate. This “local” context has in turn served other purposes and produced numerous benefits. According to one of the participants,

“I see myself as an Egyptian-Muslim. Used to be just Egyptian, but now I see myself as a Muslim first and an Egyptian. Coming here, getting older, changed my perception. Religion wasn’t super important-just about being good, but now that I’m more into religion and after coming here and having kids, especially here in the States (in Egypt it is taken for granted) the religion is very important.”

In considering the rather ambiguous roads much of the Muslim community has found itself navigating with difficulty recently, the dars can be viewed as functioning in an entirely different circumstance. As uncertainty and apprehension grip the community, the need for a safe haven of security and comfort cannot be ignored; a role the dars can fulfill for the women involved. By gathering regularly to discuss issues of personal and communal importance of their own designation, these women gain a sense of empowerment within the “local” patriarchal Muslim context, as well as the larger, and even global, frequently intimidating one. They are given the opportunity to engage in significant dialogue and debate within a welcoming and, more importantly, comforting atmosphere of their own making.

Though the reasons behind each of the women’s attendance of the dars varies, the drive toward learning more and arming oneself with the knowledge they feel they are lacking seems to be a common thread. This can be said of even the more knowledgeable

among the group, for though they may not gain as much new information as some of the other women, they accrue the benefits of helping educate the others as well as themselves through the discussion, debate, and subject matter. According to the discussion leader,

“For me, I get a lot. Because I prepare it, so I learn a lot. If I’m preparing for a lecture, I will listen to tapes, read ahadeeth books, and the information. I learn a lot from preparing. I can more information. It also allows me to reflect on myself. What I’m supposed to do better, how I better myself. And also, how I help others.”

All of these women, have for some reason or another, decided that not only are they in a position to better equip themselves with more information regarding their faith, but they are willing and eager to do so through the duroos. This is of course made possible through the assistance of the woman who prepares and gives the lessons, whom I have called the dars leader.

Playfully called “Abla” by her “students,” the dars leader is an extremely knowledgeable woman who leads a travel group to Hajj (Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca) each year with her husband. She attends classes at the Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies in Virginia, in pursuit of a BA in Sharia, though she has already received two higher education degrees. Before pursuing her BA, she received both a MA and Doctorate in Psychiatric Nursing and Research and has taught nursing at Catholic Univeristy, American University, and overseas at the King AbdulAziz University in Saudi Arabia. She has been attending the Institute part-time for four years, going to classes three times a week. She has been involved with the group for over seven years, though the direction of the group has changed since its inception.

Initially constituted as gatherings with the dars leader and two friends getting together once or twice a week in the morning to read the Quran and its translation

through exegesis, it later progressed into a larger group of approximately ten women getting together to listen to religious lectures on tape. After about two to three years of listening to tapes, the women had had enough, deciding that someone from the group should begin to lead the lessons and could give the lectures themselves. Though she had not started her classes at the Institute the dars leader volunteered her services. It is interesting to note that when asked why she volunteered, the dars leader cites her teaching background as the main drive, and not necessarily a stronger religious background or a position of more advanced education. Teaching nursing, she says, “gave me an idea of how to manage a group or teach a group.” Further, though she was neither the most religiously knowledgeable, nor was she involved in her current endeavor at the Institute, the group has invested their trust in her abilities, and has displayed their respect for her opinions, by continuing to attend, week after the week, the lessons she prepares. She is serious, yet warm-hearted, jokingly complaining that we have to have more discipline and to put some more limitations within the lesson, though it is clear that she is only half joking. She is pious without being imposing, and admonishing while benevolently encouraging. She is both well liked and well respected by the group, and part of their social circle outside of the context of the duroos.

A typical dars will often last for approximately an hour and a half to two hours, with a generally jovial atmosphere pervading, though all of the women come prepared to leave anything not directly related to the lesson out of discussion, as this is not primarily a social function. A dars that can be considered emblematic of the character, quality, and arrangement of the duroos, the following description is given in order to provide a window and a glimpse into the nature of the dars I have been attending.

Beginning at approximately 7:30, the meeting began in the kitchen of the home with a lovely spread of food, fruit, and dessert. All was homemade, and the time invested in the preparation of the spread could have rivaled any formal dinner party. Many of the women had not eaten, as they had not had time to between work and the dars, and so the food was happily received. The women used this time to catch up on the week, the day, family, work, and friends, and were generally glad to see one another. The atmosphere was casual, resembling more of a get-together between friends than what one would assume a "religious lesson" might look like. After the food, the women prayed Salat al-Ishaa in a group, with each one prepared with her own scarf. Following the prayer, each of the women moved into the living room with their cup of tea or coffee, and even plate of dessert, and situated themselves comfortably and casually. Some sat on the floor, while others crossed their legs on couches, or lounged on floor pillows. After everyone had taken their place and made themselves comfortable, the dars leader began the lesson.

While each woman was prepared with her Quran in hand, the leader let them know that they would in fact digress from the routine and instead discuss one particular subject matter. The subject of choice—"sadaqa" or charity, a subject especially befitting in light of the coming month of Ramadan. The group was more than welcoming of the idea, and the leader began. Interestingly enough, the dars leader comes prepared with her lesson plan written down. Upon her sheet of paper, she includes any relevant stories from the Sunnah (both the life of the Prophet (the "sira") and his recorded and validated sayings (the "hadith")), any dua'as (prayers), or additional verses of the Quran. Aside from simple points she wishes to touch upon, she seemingly includes anything that she has not committed to memory. The women commented freely and openly on her

explanations and examples, sometimes confirming her ideas with their own stories and anecdotes, and other times questioning and debating them. Should debate arise, everyone was welcome to comment, assert their views, and offer any knowledge they may possess on the subject. If a consensus was reached, the women were satisfied, and if not, there was the promise on the part of the leader to look into it for the coming week and to get back to them. Other times, the women simply agreed to disagree, though no one overlooked the value of the discussion that had taken place. Instead of an obvious relationship of power, the relationship between the women and their leader was one of mutual respect and admiration. In light of the coming month of Ramadan, the women encouraged one another to pray for each other and to do right throughout the holy month, as they had decided to suspend meetings for the month. As a testimony to the therapeutic and spiritual aspect of the meetings, one of the women took the opportunity to share a few moments and stories that had moved her during the painful loss of her mother. Describing the events that had transpired over the last few months, the woman described both how the group had kept her strong, but also encouraged the group to take away the lessons to be learned from her experiences. The dars had given her strength and she in turn had wanted to share the experience with the others not only to express her gratitude, but to express her faith in the impact the lessons had on each of the women's lives, and what could come of it. This is demonstrative of the extreme potential for and actualization of positive benefits for the women participating, as well as for the larger Muslim community.

Through the duroos, the women are arming themselves with an increased understanding of Islam. They are making their own decisions regarding their religious

education, deciding when, where, and how they will receive it. They have generally come to this conclusion through a variety of ways, be it the need for increased personal spirituality, the desire to further their own understanding in order to impart their knowledge to their children and their families, or simply a desire to designate a couple of hours each week to the pursuit of knowledge and dedication to Islam in order to remind themselves, as the dars leader imparted to me, “what’s important in this life.” They are choosing their own materials, their own subject matter, their own style of education, and taking Islam into their own hands for their own reasons and own benefits. There is no compulsion involved in any aspect of the dars, as everything is both voluntary and democratic. Subject matter is chosen based on either specific requests from the women, or on knowledge gained from the dars leader’s classes at the Institute that she feels the group might benefit from. Certainly, the women are free to dictate the nature and course of the discussion in a manner they feel will be of greatest interest and utility to them. With subjects ranging from the jurisprudence of prayer, charity, and the exegesis of particular chapters of the Quran, the material is varied and stretches across the spectrum. Though the dars is comprised entirely of women, the lessons are by no means restricted to subjects that deal primarily with women, though there is of course an effort to relate everything learned back to their lives, and subjects pertaining specifically to the women are touched upon. The atmosphere of the lesson, is however, one of Muslims attempting to gain a better perspective on Islam, and not necessarily Muslim women doing so, though their position as Muslim women naturally plays a role in the course of discussion and debate.

It is this propensity for dialogue that indicates a further benefit of the duroos-the acquisition of a sense of agency on behalf of the women, both female and religious. As a group organized by and for women, they are demonstrative of the initiative of these women, their organizational skills, as well as personal drive. They are actively participating in the formulation of the direction of their lives, alongside that of their families and community. In taking control of the religion for themselves, they are equipping themselves with a toolkit of their own choosing that can be used as a means to a variety of ends. They are engaging themselves, one another, and their external surroundings in discussion and dynamically interacting and coming to terms with the contexts within which they operate. They are demonstrating agency through their recognition that situations and people are changeable, and by their own efforts. The sense of satisfaction gained through their delineation of subject matter and discussion, as well as the individual gains of the women attest to the air of empowerment felt by these women. Many of them strongly attest to the benefits of the dars, a reality the dars leader continues to encourage. She plans to prepare a survey for the group regarding the lessons in terms of what is good, what needs to be improved, what they have learned, and how they benefit, saying that,

“I want to be sure they are benefiting from what we are saying. There are people that can listen, and at the time it can affect their soul, and later it is forgotten. I want to know, is there something specific that has changed in their lives as a result of what we’re saying, and if it’s better, why? And even for them, when they answer, they can feel they’ve done something. My life looked like this at one point and it changed and became this.”

Outside of the religious and spiritual facets of the dars, there is an additional aspect of the formation of a therapeutic support network. These women, in trusting one another on issues of religion, have come to trust one another in other elements as well. They rely on one another for advice and guidance on issues ranging from work to childcare to personal growth. They seek each other out regarding a variety of issues, and seem to garner strength from their association to the dars and to one another, as well as from what they have personally achieved. They are perhaps more confident in their endeavors, because of the network they have formed with one another. According to one of the participants,

“I’ve learned so much-how to cope, how to be patient, and how I’ll be rewarded for my patience in the face of difficulty. I’ve learned more about my religion and myself, and how to deal with others.”

Additionally, the dars establishes an informal female network that can and is utilized in ways outside of the lesson itself. Many of the women are involved with outside projects, be they community or work related, and the dars provides them with a built-in audience of fifteen women at any given time, who have connections to other women, and so on. There are fundraising campaigns, invitations to community and religious events, support of local schools and families, so that the group serves as a tool for interests and avenues that are wide-ranging and can extend to and benefit those outside of the group of fifteen women. According to one dars participant,

“A good idea would be for us to invite people to come to our lessons-for them to know what we say and what we’re talking about. They can learn more about us, and I think I’m going to suggest that. They can ask questions, and then they can tell others. They do not see our way, the moderates. All our kids are “normal.” I would love to

invite people to come and see and understand. Maybe once a month have a discussion-an open day. And I think a lot of people would be interested.”

It is through these individual and far-reaching benefits that the potential for social change on an individual basis is realized. As an expression of the female Muslim community, these groups are promoting spiritual and personal growth as well as individual responsibility and accountability. Based on discussions with both participants and the dars leader, there is a vivid perception of the connection between the individual and the larger community within which they function, be it Muslim or other. Most comment on the need to better themselves in order to help others do the same, and perceive a link between the duroos they attend and their road to personal improvement. According to the dars leader,

“The consequences of the duroos should be an improvement in their lives and the people around them. For them first, for example, they know that they are listening to something God and the Prophet, peace be upon him, have asked of them-that I’m improving my behavior, and personality, how I deal with people, improving my worship. Improve themselves first. Then, from that, and from what’s said, how they can improve their relationships with their kids, their husbands, they can know what their rights are, their husbands’ rights are, their kids’ rights. This is so important. This is the main essence of the family. By improving your family, you improve your community too, and other Muslims. You can’t be selfish and just learn for yourself. If you know something, or you improve yourself, you have to improve others as well. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said ‘balighu anny wa law ayah.’”

It is in recognizing the relationship between the individual and society, and in drawing the link between personal and social change and growth, that these women contribute on an individual basis to the larger transformations taking place within the Muslim community. They are challenging the discourse of the oppressed silent Muslim

woman by claiming and using Islam for themselves, and subsequently effecting change. Far from silent, these women are speaking up, week after week, learning from one another, teaching one another, and consequently reaping tremendous benefits. They are discussing issues of personal piety in the form of the jurisprudence of prayer, the benefits of fasting the month of Ramadan, and the virtues of patience. They are touching upon subjects with ramifications for their larger communities such as the merits of charity, the laws of inheritance, and the rights of women in marriage. They are engaging in efforts to improve upon themselves, and by extension their larger networks, through both purposeful and consequential means. Together, they are a collectivity acting with a degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional channels for the purpose of promoting change in the group, society, and world order of which they are a part.

Further, they are posing a challenge to the hegemonic patriarchal discourse both internal and external to Islam. Michel Foucault has addressed the nature of power and hegemony by claiming that it is omnipresent-not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. Through the duros, women are participating in the economy of power, serving as both a point from which power emanates, as well as one that challenges the dominant authorities and wielders of power. Internally, they are securing Islam for themselves, conducting their own negotiation and understanding. While the toolkit they are utilizing may serve as a contentious issue as to the nature and extent of their challenge to the hegemony, for neither are they involved in the reinterpretation of sources, nor in

the confrontation of issues such as the quality of misogynistic hadith or the incongruence of opinions of jurists, they are nonetheless challenging the dominant patriarchal discourse through their existence as platforms of empowerment and agency attested to by the women themselves. Though analysis of the discourse of the duroos through a thorough look at the sources being utilized, topics under discussion, and questions of authenticity and immutability, yields debatable results, it is more than reasonable to assume that the existence of any discourse is in fact a real and tangible challenge to hegemony, particularly one that delineates a framework that gives power to the disenfranchised. Foucault argues that where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. There is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case. Through their function as options, opportunities, and alternatives for women, the duroos serve as both a resistance to power, as well as an affirmation of individual power.

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